

**PHIL COCHRAN AND JOHN ALISON: IMAGES OF APOLLO'S
WARRIORS**

BY

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About the Author

Major Richard W. Boltz was born in Marion, Ohio in 1965. In 1984 he graduated, with honors, from Marion Catholic High School. In April of 1988, Major Boltz graduated from the University of Dayton with a degree in physics. He was an ROTC Distinguished Graduate and received a regular commission upon graduation. In March of 1989, Major Boltz was a Distinguished Graduate of Undergraduate Space Training. After two years of operating the Defense Support Program and Defense Meteorological Satellite Program satellites, he entered the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT). In December of 1992, Major Boltz was a Distinguished Graduate of AFIT and received his Master of Science degree in Space Operations. After attending Squadron Officer School, he began work as a Mission Flight Control officer at Vandenberg AFB, California. In December of 1995, Major Boltz was the Top Graduate from the United States Air Force Space Tactics School. In January of 1996, he became the Deputy Flight Commander for the United States Central Air Force Air Force Space Support Team (AFSST) at the 76th Space Operations Squadron, Falcon AFB, CO and then in June of 1997, was assigned as the Flight Commander for the Air Force Special Operations Command AFSST. In June of 1998, Major Boltz was assigned to Headquarters, Air Force Space Command where he worked as Chief, Tactics Development. Major Boltz, a senior space operator and a Distinguished Graduate of Air Command and Staff College, is currently assigned to Headquarters, United States Air Forces, Europe.

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Abstract

This study attempts to determine those World War II unconventional warfare leadership attributes that might help us in selecting today's special operations leaders. In doing so, the author first develops a template of special operations leadership qualities by starting with those attributes required of any leader—whether in charge of a Cub Scout pack or an international corporation. Next, he adjusts the list based on the unique requirements of military leadership. Finally, he tunes the list to take into account the differences between general military and special operations leadership based on interviews, correspondence with, and transcripts from oral history interviews with Air Force special operations leaders—both officers and enlisted men alike. Next, he describes the backgrounds and influencing factors of Philip G. Cochran and John R. Alison—two men who would become the first commander and deputy of the 1st Air Commando Group in WWII. Following this he tells how these two men built their unit and led the first aerial invasion force. Using these biographical sketches and historical case study, the author shows that Cochran and Alison fit nicely into the proposed template. Finally, he describes briefly how this template might be used by the Air Force special operations community.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Now, I'd like you to step forward over here. They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you; their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it?...Carpe...hear it?...Carpe, carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.

John Keating
Dead Poet's Society

The Theater Situation

Imperial Japan saw many benefits arising from its conquest of Burma. Among these were the possibility of starving China into submission through control of Burma's mountainous territory, a strategic foothold from which to acquire India's wealth and resources, and a buffer to deflect any Allied attack against its Far Eastern Empire.¹ Greatly concerned about these issues, President Franklin D. Roosevelt pressured the British to put forth plans to regain the control of Burma.

In 1943, British Gen Orde C. Wingate—a soldier experienced in unconventional warfare and described as having “a brilliant mind with an almost messianic belief in the correctness of his ideas”—was ordered to take Burma away from the Japanese.² His plan called for using

¹ John J. Torres, “Historical Analysis of the 1st Air Commando Group Operations in the CBI Theater, August 1943 to May 1944,” research paper, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air Command and Staff College, 1997), 4.

² Edward Young, *Air Commando Fighters of World War II* (North Branch, MN: Specialty Press Publishers and Wholesalers, 2000), 5.

highly mobile (and consequently lightly provisioned) infantry to attack Japan's weak and overstretched lines-of communication (LOCs). Wingate's troops—deep behind enemy lines—would need to be supplied and sustained by air. Operation LONGCLOTH, the implementation of Wingate's ideas, tested these tactics with some success but demonstrated serious weaknesses as well. These included unresponsive aerial re-supply, an inability to evacuate the injured, and weak air support for ground operations.³

With presidential direction to fix the re-supply and evacuation problems, Gen Henry H. "Hap" Arnold sensed another opportunity to demonstrate airpower's potential. To lead this effort, Arnold selected two fighter pilots with distinguished records: Lieutenant Colonels Philip G. Cochran and John R. Alison. With informal direction from Arnold to "go over and steal that show" and to "transform the Wingate campaign into a new experiment in the use of air power," Cochran and Alison formed an organization from scratch that achieved tremendous results.⁴ Some of these results include the:

- FIRST air unit employed with total autonomy
- FIRST aerial invasion into enemy territory
- FIRST nighttime heavy glider assault landing
- FIRST night combat glider recovery
- FIRST glider airlift of large animals
- FIRST major employment of light airplanes in [WWII] combat
- FIRST air unit to employ helicopters
- FIRST rescue by combat helicopter⁵

Statement of the Research Question

As I was doing the basic background investigation for this project—long before I had chosen a specific research question or working title—I stumbled across photographs of Cochran, Alison, and other members of the First Air Commando Group and immediately thought of the scene from the movie *Dead Poet's Society*, which I referred to in this chapter's epigraph. In the particular scene from which this epigraph was taken, the main character, John Keating—an English instructor at an all-boys preparatory school—asks his students to look at photographs of students from long ago. In his attempt to energize and excite the students as to the boundless

³ Torres, 10.

⁴ Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951), 54-5. See also Philip G. Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20 – 21 October 1975 and 11 November 1975. Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-876, 179.

⁵ Herbert A. Mason, Randy G. Bergeron, and James A. Renfrow, *Operation THURSDAY: Birth of the Air Commandos* ([Washington DC]: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1994), 44-5.

possibilities before them, Keating harkens back to the exuberance and exploits of men long dead. After pointing out that there were many similarities between the two generations, Keating tells his class to listen to the message coming from the young men in the photographs—the message being to “seize the day” and to “make your lives extraordinary!”⁶

As I looked at photographs of other men long dead, or well in to the winters of their lives, I detected the same message. In the photographs of Cochran and Alison, I saw before me the faces of men who, at the ripe old ages of thirty-four and thirty-two, respectively, became “bird” colonels and led nearly 900 men in the Allies’ efforts to recapture Burma. Thinking about “seizing the day” and applying it to “seize the future,” I asked myself: What leadership attributes or faults exhibited by these men are useful in terms of identifying and selecting today’s Air Force special operations leaders?

Importance of the Issue Under Consideration

Special operations leadership is a worthy subject for study and research because special operations have taken on an increasingly important role since the end of the Cold War. Long gone is the relatively stable, bi-polar world to which our nation had become accustomed. The United States today is faced with the problems of failed states, increasing numbers of international actors with access to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons; regional hegemonic power grabs by unfriendly nations; and the uncertainty of Russia’s political, economic, and military reforms.⁷

Special operations forces (SOF)—highly trained and with specialized equipment—provide the National Command Authority (NCA) with a wide range of options to meet the challenges outlined above, plus many more. In fact, Dr. Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., the Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of International Security Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, sees a future in which SOF will not only be used for “high stakes and high risk activities” like countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but also conducting missions typically associated with conventional forces such as attacks against enemy

⁶ Steven Haft, Paul Junger Witt, and Tony Thomas, prods., *Dead Poet’s Society* ([Hollywood, CA]: Touchstone/Buena Vista Films, 1989).

⁷ Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., “Sources of Instability: Implications for Special Operations Forces,” in *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold*, ed. Richard H. Schultz, Jr., Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., and W. Bradley Stock (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 17.

command and control.⁸

Special operations span the entire spectrum of military engagement from peace to full-scale war (see Figure 1). To prepare for this range of employment, SOF are manned, trained, and equipped for nine principle missions. These are Aviation Advisory Operations (formerly known as Foreign Internal Defense); Combating Terrorism; Civil Affairs; Counter Proliferation of WMD; Direct Action; Information Operations; Psychological Operations; Special Reconnaissance; and Unconventional Warfare.⁹ SOF's unique training and equipment produces capabilities for collateral activities for which SOF are not specifically manned, trained, or equipped, but nonetheless are frequently tasked to perform. These include Countermine; Humanitarian Assistance; Personnel Recovery; Coalition Support; Security Assistance; Counter-drug; Peace Operations; and Special Activities.¹⁰

The very nature of SOF is typically focused on small groups conducting military actions with the objective of achieving operational or strategic level effects.¹¹ Although military history tends to highlight a lone figure such as a general or admiral, SOF is different. In SOF operations, teams of relatively lower ranking individuals usually have the greater impact.¹² As such, the selection of small group leaders in SOF can be and often is just as important as the selection of its senior leaders.

⁸ Pfaltzgraff, 24.

⁹ Briefing, Air Force Special Operations Command, subject: AFSOC Command Brief, February 2001.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Orr Kelly, *Commandos: From a Dark Sky: The Story of U.S. Air Force Special Operations* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), x.

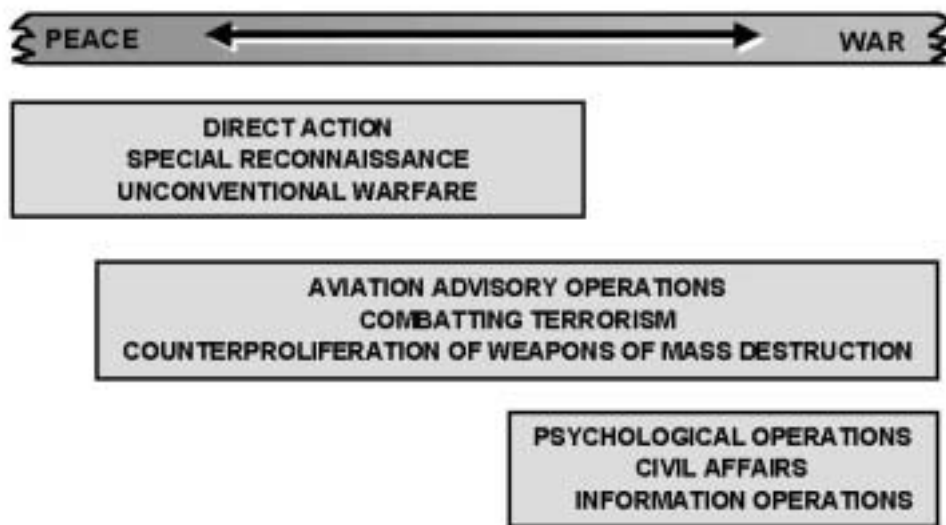


Figure 1. SOF Missions Across the Spectrum of Conflict.

(Source: Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) Command Brief, February 2001)

Evidence and Methodology

To determine unconventional warfare leadership attributes useful in selecting today's Air Force special operations leaders, I will develop a special operations leadership template of appropriate qualities based on a review of applicable literature, oral history transcripts, and personal communication and interviews with former and current special operations leaders. Next, I will describe the backgrounds and factors influencing Cochran and Alison—the two men who served as the first commander and deputy of the First Air Commando Group in WWII. After this, I will describe how these two men were selected to build and lead the Air Commandos in Burma. I will then apply the template developed earlier to Cochran and Alison. Finally, I describe the possible implications that these results may have for the present and future of Air Force SOF.

Although most of my primary source documentation comes from the Air Force Historical Research Agency, I was able to get a small portion elsewhere. These include the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri; the Records Procedure Branch at the Air Force Reserve Personnel Center; and interviews with those persons who knew Cochran or Alison or who participated in the operations under consideration.

Chapter 2

A LEADERSHIP TEMPLATE

The question, “Who ought to be boss?” is like asking, “Who ought to be tenor in the quartet?” Obviously the man who can sing tenor.

Henry Ford

Introduction

All buildings—from the mightiest cathedrals to the most humble family dwellings—begin with a foundation upon which the structure is built. My thesis—just like a building—needs its foundation.¹³ Thus, before I can discuss those attributes that are required of good Air Force special operations leaders, I must first answer three questions. First, “What is leadership?” Second, “What is military leadership?” And third, “What attributes are unique to Air Force special operations leadership?”

Leadership

According to *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, leadership is defined as a capacity “to guide on a way [especially] by going in advance”; “to direct on a course or in a direction”; or “to direct the operations, activity, or performance of [some organization].”¹⁴ These definitions are somewhat cold and impersonal, however, and leave one wanting something of greater substance.

Many authors have stepped forward in attempts to fill this want. There have been perhaps thousands if not tens of thousands of books and articles written on leadership. Some

¹³ I leave it up to the reader to decide whether my work is more like the cathedral, humble family dwelling, or something in between.

¹⁴ Frederick C. Mish, ed., *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1984), 679.

offer sterile definitions much like those from Webster's dictionary. Others, like that of Lt Gen Bruce Fister—former commander of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC)—describe leadership in terms that are more human. For General Fister, “leadership is taking on the dreams, the fears, and discouragement of the people and returning them in a way that provides hope, confidence and encouragement so they can take responsibility for the task and accomplish the mission.”¹⁵ Although there are many different definitions of leadership, most revolve around similar themes. In his book, *From Sage to Artisan: The Nine Roles of the Value-Driven Leader*, Stuart Wells nicely summarizes these themes: creating order; inspiring action; and improving performance.¹⁶

My ideas on leadership are somewhere between those of the dictionary and General Fister and are best represented by the definition proposed by Philip Crosby in his book, *The Absolutes of Leadership*. “Leadership,” he wrote, “is deliberately causing people-driven actions in a planned fashion for the purpose of accomplishing the leader’s agenda.”¹⁷ Crosby chose specific words to convey specific meanings. *Deliberately* was used to indicate actions that are taken for a particular reason; *people-driven* is used because one leads people, not machines; *planned fashion* indicates actions taken “according to a known, time-sequenced plan;” and *leader’s agenda* is employed because actions are taken to achieve specific goals.¹⁸

That said, one can deduce certain leadership capabilities that one needs no matter the type of organization one leads. These include the ability “to comprehend the mission, requirement, assignment or task; to visualize what is required to achieve it; to communicate [those requirements] to the force [one] lead[s]; to motivate the force and, when necessary, to modify the vision during execution.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Lt Gen Bruce Fister, E-mail to author, 5 March 2001.

¹⁶ Stuart J. Wells, *From Sage to Artisan: The Nine Roles of the Value-Driven Leader* (Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing, 1997). 1.

¹⁷ Philip B. Crosby, *The Absolutes of Leadership* (San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer & Company, 1996), 2-3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Col Robert Neumann, E-mail to author, 22 February 2001.

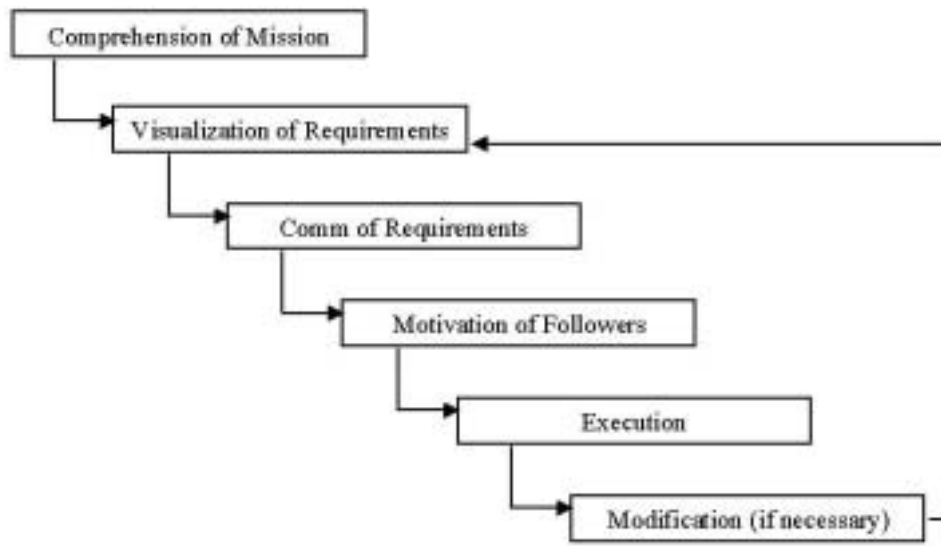


Figure 2. Essential Abilities of Any Leader

If we accept for purposes of this thesis that leadership is generally defined as deliberately causing people-driven actions in a planned fashion for the purpose of accomplishing the leader’s agenda and that any leader must be capable of performing the functions outlined in figure 1, then what leadership attributes or qualities “fall out” as a consequence? The first is obvious—*technical competence*. If one is to fully comprehend the mission or assignment, one must have sufficient knowledge of the subject to dissect the problem and to develop a preliminary plan of action.²⁰

This leads to the second attribute, *vision*. Vision allows the leader to clearly know what he wants to achieve and to visualize what is required in order to succeed in the mission, assignment, or task. Spanning the chasm that separates politics, academia, and the military, the importance of vision is widely recognized. The governor of Michigan, a recognized authority on

²⁰ Although I use masculine pronouns throughout my thesis, the reader should not infer that I consider females incapable of leading civil or military organizations. I use the masculine form only to avoid awkward sentence structures.

leadership and management, and the current commander of AFSOC list vision as first among those traits commonly found in successful leaders.²¹

Without the ability to communicate effectively, a person with a plan is just that. He is unlikely to be a successful leader. On the other hand, *good communications skills* allow a leader to clearly articulate his vision. Communication is not one-way, however. By being a good listener, a leader can also improve the organization's performance through feedback. Maj Gen Perry Smith, in *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders*, states, "a dynamic communicator can motivate people to want to go back to work, committed to doing an even better job than they did in the past."²² Besides using communications skills to motivate an organization, a leader can accomplish the same through teaching. Being *able to teach* and being a good leader are complementary. By sharing insights and experiences and by working to improve his followers performance, a leader can have a profoundly positive effect on his subordinates.²³

Because "no plan of operations extends with certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main strength," a leader must be ready to modify his vision and corresponding plan.²⁴ Thus, a leader should be *introspective*, not only with respect to his plan of action but also to his professional relationships. By stepping back to determine what works and what does not, a leader will be able to continue the course or make adjustments as appropriate.²⁵

As I discussed above, if the leadership abilities depicted in figure 2 above represent those skills required from a good leader of any organization, then the attributes associated with those abilities should be a subset of the characteristics of any good leader. Thus, *technical competence, vision, good communication skills, an ability to teach, and introspection* are the core attributes which I will now build upon.

²¹ John Engler, "The Four Marks of Leadership," speech to Stephen F. Austin State University commencement, Nacogdoches, Texas, 15 May 1999, in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 65, no. 24 (1 October 1999): 767; Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 39; and Lt Gen Clay Bailey, interviewed by author, 9 March 2001.

²² Perry M. Smith, *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1986), 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴ Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke, *On Strategy* (1871) quoted in *Moltke On the Art of War*, ed. Daniel J. Hughes, trans. Harry Bell and Daniel Hughes (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 45.

²⁵ Smith, 13.

Military Leadership

Does the definition of leadership change as we narrow our scope from leadership in general to military leadership? For me, it does not. What changes, however, is the contextual environment through which leadership is exercised. Perhaps the most obvious distinction between non-military and military leadership is that military leaders must on occasion order subordinates into situations in which they may face severe injury or even death.²⁶ Closely related to this is the high level of interdependence between members of the military. It is easy to imagine circumstances where if one person disregards proper orders, one may not only jeopardize the success of the mission, but also the lives of fellow service members, as well. This “chaos of war” and potential for injury or death warrants the unquestioned authority found in military organizations.²⁷ These characteristics of the military environment—the possibility of ordering subordinates to their injury or death and the high level of interdependence between the organization’s members—are unlikely to face the leader of a civilian corporation, for example.

The next characteristic of the military environment has to do with sacrifice. When one joins the military, one gives up certain personal liberties and accepts a 24 hour-a-day, seven days-a-week commitment—all at a fixed salary. To enforce these requirements and to guide the conduct of their profession, military members rely on the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Along these same lines, military supervisors include personal qualities—such as character—in members’ performance reports and promotion recommendations. Again, these contextual elements of the military leadership environment—significant sacrifice, subjection to a more

²⁶ This is not to say that the military is the only profession to *face* these risks. Certain civilian professions are quite dangerous. Most notable are police officers and firemen.

²⁷ Jane A. Fitzgibbons, “One Civilian’s View of Military Leadership” (course paper, National War College, 1999), 5.

restrictive set of standards, and evaluation of personal qualities for professional advancement—are unlikely to be found in the civilian workplace.

In many civilian organizations, as one rises up the “corporate ladder,” more emphasis is placed on managerial skills (i.e., planning, organizing, and directing) than on the technical skills that helped the person advance in the first place. While this generally holds true in the military as well, there seems to be a tendency for military organizations to place greater value on the technical skills of their senior leaders. One author writes, “Certain exploits or battles or raids or fights are fundamental parts of certain individuals’ mythologies....The subordinates must believe that the commander knows what he or she is doing.”²⁸

Another difference in the contextual sense pertains to change. Many civilian organizations encourage and thrive on change. Although many of today’s young military officers are encouraged to “think outside the box,” it has been my experience that the operational Air Force as an institution does not want its members of the lower and medium levels to stray too far from pre-defined structures. Described as “keeping one foot inside the box,” military organizations find it more important to handle change rather than to create it.²⁹

The final contextual difference between the general and military environments has to do with the degree to which military leadership is dependent upon the situation. Perhaps the most striking example is represented by the extremes of war and peace. A military leader may embrace certain leadership practices in peacetime that would be inappropriate for war and then, in peacetime, employ other practices optimized for war that might be inappropriate during

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Ibid., 6. This is not to say that no changes ever take place in the military. Some notable examples are computers, nuclear weapons, and the field of operations research.

peace.³⁰ Moreover, the military is perhaps the only profession wherein one only gets to put his training to practice once in a lifetime.

Because of this difference in contextual matters, military leaders must exhibit qualities over and above those required of the “generic” leader. *Integrity, leadership by example and “from the front,” technical proficiency and confidence, and caring for one’s people* lead the list of these additional attributes. A leader must exude integrity not only because it defines who the leader is but also because the people under command will not deliver the same level of commitment if they question the leader’s integrity.³¹ Because the military leader may find himself ordering

³⁰ Fitzgibbons, 6 and Michael Russell, “Personality Styles of Effective Soldiers,” *Military Review* 80, (January-February 2000): 69-70. Dr. Mark Russell (US Army) argues that the military is made up of primarily two different personality types. Believing that the military does a good job of weeding out the odd or unusual types, he believes one group—labeled “Cluster B,” and described by psychologists as “mildly Antisocial or Narcissistic [sic].”—displays adventuresome, imaginative, innovative, daring, and decisive characteristics. “Cluster C”—described as somewhat “Obsessive-Compulsive or Dependent”—presents dependable, conscientious, detail-oriented, punctual, and selfless characteristics [sic]. Basing his reasoning on the different military requirements for war and peace, Russell states that Cluster C performs well and is rewarded disproportionately during peacetime while Cluster B does markedly better during war. This subject would make for an interesting thesis project.

³¹ Smith, 15; Col Charles R. Myers, “The Core Values: Framing and Resolving Ethical Issues for the Air Force,” in *AY 2000 Leadership and Command, Phase I*, vol. 1, ed. Sybill Glover (Maxwell AFB AL: Air Command and Staff College, 1999), 52; and Lt Col Stephan Laushine, E-mail to author, 22 February 2001. Many of the readings I came across and the people I corresponded with listed integrity as an essential element of military leadership. These include General Harry C. Aderholt as told by Warren A. Trest, *Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America’s Secret Air Wars* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 2; James A Knight, Jr., transcript of oral history interview by Col. James C. Posgate, 30 November – 1 December 1983, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1561, 86, 178; Duane H. Cassidy, transcript of oral history interview by Roger D. Launis, 4 and 17 August 1989, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1840, 13-14; Tom Burris et al., *Guidelines for Command* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, May 1995), 33; Robert L. Wendzel, “Leadership and Education,” in *Concepts for Air Force Leadership* (AU-24), eds. Richard I. Lester and A. Glenn Morton (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1996), 7; Thomas E. Cronin, “Thinking and Learning About Leadership,” in *Concepts for Air Force Leadership* (AU-24), eds. Richard I. Lester and A. Glenn Morton (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1996), 238, 240; Brig Gen Richard Comer, E-mail to author, 10 January 2001; and CMSgt Mike Lampe, E-mail to author, 14 March 2001.

subordinates to their injury or death in order to accomplish the mission, the subordinates must be sure of their leader's integrity—he must be honest and his motives and intentions must be pure. Likewise, a leader of integrity enforces standards firmly but fairly and ensures that everyone receives equitable treatment.

Leading by example and “from the front” is equally important and goes hand in hand with integrity. Expecting the same from his subordinates, a military leader must exhibit “unimpeachable character and integrity” and be willing to do anything that he asks of his subordinates.³² Not only must he live his personal life beyond reproach, but he must also expose himself to a commensurate level of danger “in the fight.” Only by doing these things will the leader show that he runs comparable risks, depends upon those in his organization, shares similar sacrifices with his subordinates, and lives by the same professional code of behavior.

To lead by example and “from the front,” one needs more than the basic level of competence in one's profession—one must be adept.³³ If the leader does not possess technical proficiency, he does not motivate by leading from the front; he simply increases the danger to the mission, his subordinates, and himself. Proficiency alone is not enough, however. Although he should not fall to braggadocio, a military leader must also have an infectious

³² Engler, 767, Laushine, Knight, Fister, Lampe, and Lt Gen Norton Schwartz, commander of Alaskan Command, Alaskan North American Aerospace Defense Command Region, and 11th Air Force, E-mail to author, 24 January 2001. This does not mean that the leader must do everything that he asks of his subordinates (this would be a practical impossibility), but he must be willing.

³³ Knight, 86; Schwartz; and Laushine.

confidence in himself, his organization, and in the “rightness” of what he is trying to accomplish. In doing so, a leader creates an environment that accepts creative thought.³⁴

A leader who cares for his people goes a long way to compensate for the sacrifices individuals make to serve their country. But caring for your people goes well beyond making sure that they are clothed, fed, trained, and equipped. It also means they are recognized for their accomplishments, empowered to make decisions, disciplined firmly (but fairly) for their transgressions, and even removed for cause, if appropriate.³⁵ As someone with leadership experience once told me, “If your people know you truly care about them...they will take care of the mission and do just about anything for you.”³⁶

Two additional attributes—tempered ingenuity and flexibility—are also needed to round out the attributes of the military leader.³⁷ Tempered ingenuity allows the leader to effectively balance the need to be creative and adaptive with not straying too far from proven military procedures. Flexibility, on the other hand, allows the military leader to adjust his leadership style according to the situation and dictates of the mission.

Our list of attributes has grown. By combining those attributes from the general and military leadership environments, the list now contains the following: vision, good communications skills, an ability to teach, introspection, integrity, leadership by example and

³⁴ Engler, 767. See also John C. Kunich and Richard I. Lester, “Profile of a Leader: The Wallenberg Effect,” in *Concepts for Air Force Leadership* (AU-24), eds. Richard I. Lester and A. Glenn Morton (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1996), 227; Cronin, 238; and Robert L. Taylor and William E. Rosenbach, eds., *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) iii.

³⁵ Burris, 33; Smith, 8; and Lampe.

³⁶ Laushine.

³⁷ Kunich and Lester, 227 and Fitzgibbons, 6.

“from the front,” technical proficiency and confidence, caring for one’s people, tempered ingenuity, and flexibility.³⁸

Air Force Special Operations Leadership

The U.S. has special operations forces because civilian leadership has determined (and then mandated through law) that our nation should have a special operations capability different than the capabilities of forces trained, organized, and equipped to fight major theater wars.³⁹ But what are special operations? And how does Air Force special operations leadership differ from conventional military leadership? According to the *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, special operations are those operations:

. . . conducted by specially organized, trained, and equipped military and paramilitary forces to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional military means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. These operations are conducted during peacetime competition, conflict, and war, independently or in coordination with operations of conventional, non-special operations forces. Political-military considerations frequently shape special operations, requiring clandestine, covert, or low visibility techniques, and oversight at the national level. Special operations differ from conventional operations in degree of physical risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets.⁴⁰

Employing small units in both direct and indirect military action, special operations concentrate on strategic and operational objectives and require specialized personnel, equipment, training and tactics.⁴¹

In addition to depicting the flexible and selective nature of SOF, figure 3 also represents the relative contribution of SOF as compared to conventional forces throughout the spectrum of conflict. As one can see, SOF provides the preponderance of effort throughout peacetime engagement. As one moves to the right through the “deter and prevent” and then the “fight and win” portions of the spectrum, conventional forces take on increasingly greater roles until they

³⁸ *Technical competency* from the previous section was replaced by the more stringent *technical proficiency* that was discussed within this section.

³⁹ Lt Gen Clay Bailey, commander, AFSOC, briefing to author, 9 March 2001.

⁴⁰ *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, Version 2.1 (Fayetteville, NC: Cubic Applications, Inc., 1998). CD-ROM, January 1998.

⁴¹ Bailey.

carry the weight of the effort. Throughout, not only does SOF continue to perform traditional missions, but SOF also contribute to the conventional fight with residual or collateral capabilities.⁴² Some of the SOF-unique capabilities include:

1. Gain[ing] access to hostile or denied areas;
2. Communicat[ing] worldwide with organic equipment;
3. Liv[ing] in austere, harsh environments without extensive support;
4. Survey[ing] and assess[ing] crisis situations and report[ing] rapidly and accurately;
5. Work[ing] closely with regional military and civilian authorities and populations; and
6. Deploy[ing] with low[er] profile and less intrusive presence than larger conventional forces⁴³

As the air arm of US Special Operations Command, AFSOC functions not as a maneuver element but as a supporting force.⁴⁴ It is a force provider of specialized fixed and rotary wing aviation assets and combat controllers, pararescuemen, and combat weathermen who work in Special Tactics Teams. If operating within a joint force, Air Force special operations forces

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Although the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment has air assets, it is not staffed by *airmen*. Moreover, it does not have sufficient manning to allow it to have a theater-wide perspective but instead is focused on the tactical mission to “fly and fight.”



Figure 3. Flexible and Selective Engagement of SOF

likely fill two roles: 1) the air component of the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) and 2) a force provider to the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC).⁴⁵ A notional Air Force special operations forces (AFSOF) operational command and control structure is shown in figure 4.

Having taken all these things into considerations, I conclude that Air Force special operations leadership differs from conventional military leadership in three ways that are somewhat inter-related. The first is the nature of the people involved; the second is the nature of the missions conducted; and the third is the sometimes tenuous relationships that Air Force special operations forces have with both the other SOF components and the conventional Air Force.

⁴⁵ Bailey and *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*.

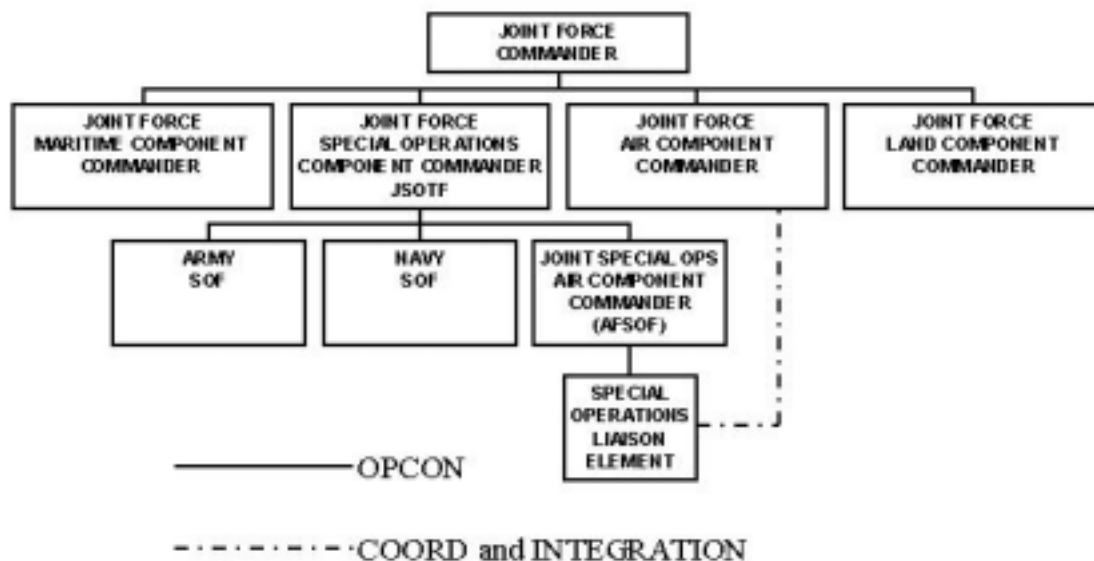


Figure 4. A Notional, Operational AFSOF C2 Structure

The People

One of the primary differences between conventional and Air Force special operations leadership surfaces because of people—both those that make up the respective forces and also the indigenous population with whom the forces interact and operate. Air Force special operators are highly motivated and trained and fully capable of operating with little to no supervision and are carefully selected and undergo extensive, mission-specific training programs. Thus, these people (and their capabilities) cannot be easily or quickly replaced.⁴⁶ Therefore, an Air Force special operations leader must have *full confidence and trust in his subordinates*—allowing those responsible for execution to do the detailed mission planning.⁴⁷

The other “people aspect” that makes this brand of leadership different from conventional leadership is the manner in which special operations interact with other nations’ military forces

⁴⁶ Neumann and *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*.

⁴⁷ Col Lee Hess, interviewed by author, 30 January 2001; Dr. James E. Mitchell, Chief, Psychological Application, 24th Special Tactics Squadron, personal communication to author, 18 January 2001; Fister; and Laushine.

and populations. Some AFSOC units specialize in assessing, training, and advising foreign aviation forces in force employment, sustainment, and integration. Other units attempt to exploit an enemy's vulnerabilities to accomplish our nation's strategic or operational objectives by advising, assisting, and sustaining resistance forces. Still others broadcast radio and television messages to targeted populations. And all may be called upon to provide humanitarian assistance.⁴⁸

Thus, today's Air Force special operations leaders must possess the attributes described by Maj Gen James Hobson—former commander of AFSOC—as *eclectic humanitarianism* and *cultural relativity*. Eclectic humanitarianism—“the ability to select the best elements from various cultural sources in order to stress individual dignity and worth and promote advancing human welfare and social reform”—is important, Hobson says, because only by understanding the target population's underlying issues can our forces exploit them to “bring the civilian population to the point of open rebellion or a willingness to support the armed objectives of the United States.”⁴⁹

Cultural Relativity—the “ability to determine the nature, value and/or quality of the attributes of various cultures relative to their customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits and to consistently display understanding, adherence, appreciation and respect for these cultural diversities”—is also an important attribute for today's special operations leader.⁵⁰ Warning against “ethnocentric” thinking, Hobson believes that leaders need to maintain an open mind so as to gain from the host nation both popular and material support.⁵¹

The Missions

Another important difference between conventional and Air Force special operations leadership arises from the nature of the mission. Many SOF missions must be carried out with surgical precision because of the potential for great return, if successful, and great cost, if not.

⁴⁸ Briefing, Air Force Special Operations Command, subject: AFSOC Command Brief, February 2001.

⁴⁹ Maj Gen James Hobson, E-mail to author, 29 January 2001.

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also Harry C. Aderholt, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Samuel E. Riddlebarger, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-249, 38.

⁵¹ Hobson. General Hobson believes “ethnocentric baggage. . . cloud[s] [the leader's] ability to relate to the target population and to exploit their capabilities in order to achieve the military or political objectives of the United States.”

While it is difficult to conceal the movement and actions of conventional forces; ideally, SOF get in, accomplish the task, and get out quickly and quietly. Often called upon for missions for which no one else is trained, SOF are heavily reliant upon teamwork because these “high risk/high reward” missions demand “precision performance by all participants.”⁵² Besides this “high risk/high reward” facet, Air Force special operations missions rarely are single service affairs. That is, most are conducted in coordination and cooperation with land and sea special operations components.⁵³

From these observations, I add three additional attributes to the list required of today’s Air Force special operations leader—an *ability to assess and a willingness to take risks, credibility with joint special operations counterparts, and ingenuity*. Because of the nature of SOF missions, important intelligence or information may be lacking. Even in these situations though, Air Force special operations leaders must be able to assess, contain (if possible), and accept certain levels of risk.⁵⁴

The ability to work with and develop relationships with sister-components is “an earned status” and is something that takes a long time to foster. A former commander of the 16th Special Operations Wing and Special Operations Command, Pacific, stressed the importance of this credibility with other special operations counterparts. He stated, “By the time an individual rises to unit level command, he or she must have developed associations with counterparts in the other services.”⁵⁵

Although I discussed ingenuity in the section on military leadership, it was tempered by

⁵² Lt Col Thomas Trask, E-mail to author, 21 January 2001; Neumann, and Laushine.

⁵³ Schwartz.

⁵⁴ Schwartz and Fister.

⁵⁵ Schwartz. General Richard Comer, vice-commander, AFSOC wrote that out of the bastardized command and control issues regarding aviation assets in Vietnam, special operations leaders pushed for “dedicated, specialized aircraft” that would be employed under the direction of special operations airmen responsible to an overall special operations commander. Because under only such a system could Air Force special operators have sufficient control to adequately fulfill its responsibilities to their cross-service, special operations brethren, this arrangement was critical to developing trust and confidence throughout the special operations community. General Comer states, “Only then could the airman earn the trust and confidence of the special operators in the other services and be a full member of the effort, able to make commitments, affect planning decisions, and advise on the possible and the impossible.” Brig Gen Richard Comer, E-mail to author, 10 January 2001.

the necessity of “keeping one foot in the box.” The nature of the special operations mission differs somewhat and calls for a less-restrained ingenuity.⁵⁶ Lt Gen Norton Schwartz offered that

. . . effective SOF leaders must have imagination...the capacity to improvise, to develop operational plans and [tactics, techniques, and procedures] appropriate to the circumstances and import of the assigned mission. This does not suggest irreverence, disregard for convention, or lack of discipline. Rather, it means a SOF leader must be able to distinguish between that which is discretionary and that which is driven by operational necessity, between indifference to convention and intelligent improvisation based on mission analysis, and between recklessness and risk-taking worthy of the probable gain.⁵⁷

Similarly, General Hobson has noted that the nature of special operations forces and their missions make “thinking outside the box” a necessity because SOF typically are far removed from the normal support infrastructure. Moreover, he stated, “SOF must compensate by thinking and exploiting the power of independent thought and its leaders must possess this constructive imagination to a much higher degree than the rest of the military.”⁵⁸

Intra- and Inter-Service Relationships

The final major difference between conventional and Air Force special operations leadership arises from the sometimes tenuous relationships between Air Force SOF and the other components’ SOF and the conventional Air Force, respectively. General Richard Comer—vice commander of AFSOC—summarizes the situation well. He writes,

Today, whether the SOF air units [change operational control] to the JSOTF or to the JFACC remains a crucial issue. The existence of a [Joint Special Operations Air Component Commander] is a burr in the saddle for many of our senior leaders in the USAF. Many USAF leaders think we in [Air Force] SOF have “gone Army.” At the same time, our SOF brethren sprinkle their talk about the Special Op[eration]s Air Component with accusations of lesser warrior status, insinuating that our main concerns are comfort and crew rest instead of mission. We are caught betwixt and between—an air component for SOF with two bosses, the USAF and the Special Operator. Both seem to doubt our loyalty and our devotion to either our service or our mission, each boss being jealous of the other.⁵⁹

To face this situation, Air Force special operations leaders must be able to “serve two

⁵⁶ Schwartz and Hobson.

⁵⁷ Schwartz.

⁵⁸ Hobson.

masters”—both the SOF community and the Air Component Commander, which is typically filled by the Air Force. It is no longer possible for Air Force special operators to ignore the workings of the conventional force.⁶⁰ As a *special operations advocate*, the leader should not only be well-versed in special operations, but also in Air Operations Center processes and functions and conventional capabilities so as to “sell” his capability when it makes sense and to recommend against those missions he knows his force is not capable of completing.⁶¹

Conclusion

By answering three questions—“What is leadership?”, “What is military leadership?”, and “What attributes are unique to Air Force special operations leadership?”, I have formed a set attributes that I believe are representative of those required of a good special operations leader. The attributes that make up my leadership template, therefore, are:

1. Vision.
2. Good communications skills.
3. An ability/desire to teach.
4. Introspection.
5. Integrity.
6. Leadership by example and “from the front.”
7. Technical proficiency and confidence.
8. Care for one’s subordinates.
9. Flexibility.
10. Full confidence in and trust of subordinates.

⁵⁹ Brig Gen Richard Comer, E-mail to author, 10 January 2001.

⁶⁰ Ibid. General Comer further explained, “So, the ability of the Air unit Special Ops commander must find a way to be a good subordinate to both bosses, reconciling the requirements of each, accomplishing the mission and ensuring the requirements of the theater Air Force component are met. When involved in small and discreet SOF missions, the commander has only to concentrate on satisfying the SOF customer. As the complexity of the mission and the maturity of the theater increase, the greater the amount of attention the JFACC or theater air component requires. . . . Therefore, commanders' abilities to satisfy the SOF customer and the conventional air commander while leading his own unit will be a necessary skill set. His knowledge of Air Operations Center processes and of the total kit-bag of air capabilities in his theater will become more pressing in direct relation to the size of the theater and its maturity in command and control.”

11. Eclectic humanitarianism.
12. Cultural relativity.
13. Ability to assess and willingness to take risks.
14. Credibility with SOF counterparts.
15. Ingenuity.
16. Balanced advocacy for special operations.

⁶¹ Fister.

Chapter 3

PHILIP G. COCHRAN – BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

He [Cochran] talked a tough, hard-boiled war; actually, he fought a fair one, considerate of men and fellow officers. This was clear not only from his generous praise of fellow officers but from his fury on at least one occasion when newspapers gave Flip Corkin the glory he felt belonged to “the kids, these American kids that are just automatically wonderful.” He stood up for his gang and his generation—pilots, ground crews, aces, grease monkeys, young Americans at war in distant lands.

Lowell Thomas
Back to Mandalay

Introduction

Perhaps the best way to understand a man is to look at his life and examine the people, events, and moments that shaped his life. As such, in this chapter I put the microscope on Philip G. Cochran. Beginning with his simple life in Erie, Pennsylvania, I look at the time Cochran spent at Ohio State University, his testing for admission and his acceptance into the Army Air Corps, and his subsequent military assignments up to his interview with Gen Henry H. ‘Hap’ Arnold for the Burma operation.

Civilian Life

Cochran started out humbly in Erie, Pennsylvania—a typical industrial city located on Lake Erie in the northwest corner of the state. The second of five boys, he was born to Bernard and Mary (Reardon) Cochran and was raised in an Irish-Catholic, middle-class neighborhood where he attended public schools and performed duty as an

altar boy.⁶² After graduating from high school, Cochran—who had fancied himself an athlete—wanted to play college football and delayed his start by two years to haul ice to become big enough to play ball and to earn enough money to help pay for his education.⁶³

College Life

Deciding that he probably would not be able to build himself into inter-collegiate football material, Cochran figured that he had better press ahead with college. He chose Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, because it offered a good education at an inexpensive price—even for out-of-state residents. Moreover, Cochran was familiar with Columbus because his mother had grown up there, he enjoyed the city, and felt that finding a job there to help him pay his way through college would be relatively easy.⁶⁴ He indeed was able to find work and ended up waiting on tables at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house as well as singing with dance bands at nightclubs in Columbus.⁶⁵

During his years at Ohio State, Cochran attended Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) classes. It was there that his life-long habit of paying little attention to military appearance standards and formality began. Once, during an ROTC inspection by a visiting general, Cochran was called out for wearing black and white shoes with his uniform. He tried to get out of trouble by telling the officer that the shoes he was wearing were “the only ones he had to his name.”⁶⁶ Towards the end of his sophomore year, worried about having enough money to return the following year, Cochran became interested in aviation. It was the middle of the Depression and the outlook for jobs was not very good when Cochran read a three-part series about an Army Air Corps flying school in Texas. The article intrigued him, not only because the school was extremely demanding—only one in four successfully completed it—but also because a person could

⁶² Philip G. Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20 – 21 October 1975 and 11 November 1975, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-876, 1-3.

⁶³ A. J. Liebling, “Profiles: Guerrilla From Erie, PA,” *The New Yorker*, 13 February 1943, 24-5.

⁶⁴ Cochran, transcript of oral, 14-5.

⁶⁵ Liebling, 24-5. See also Cochran, transcript of oral history, 16.

⁶⁶ Liebling, 22.

get accepted with only two years of college.⁶⁷



(Source: "The First Air Commandos," *Aerospace Historian* 29, no. 1 (March 1982)).

Figure 5. Col Philip G. Cochran

As it turned out, Cochran did get a good summer job and was able to save enough money for his third year. However, he sat out a year between his junior and senior years because of money problems. After working in a local paper mill and singing with bands for another year, Cochran returned to finish his senior year in Columbus where he graduated in 1935 at 25 years of age.⁶⁸

Army Air Corps Physical/Entrance Examination

After college, Cochran got a job with the State of Pennsylvania but he was not satisfied. Since reading the article about the Flying School, he had thought that he would like to fly so he decided to take the air forces cadet examination that was to be held in Detroit. Not having enough money to pay for the trip, Cochran sold a family heirloom and played in a

⁶⁷ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 25-6.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 26-7. See also Liebling, 24-5.

semi-professional football game to pay his way.⁶⁹ Of the twelve men who undertook the psychological and physical examinations, Cochran was one of only two men that passed.⁷⁰

Into the Military

Surprised at having been accepted, Cochran attended flight training at Randolph Field in San Antonio, Texas. It was at flight training that Cochran's trademark—his desire and ability to teach—revealed itself. Speaking of John Alison—an underclassman at Randolph and his eventual deputy in Burma—Cochran stated,

We lived on the same floor, and I knew him as that little fellow in the lower class who wanted to learn things I had already been taught. I was eager to tell him. I have a peculiarity that makes me want to tell the other fellow what I have learned. I can't stand to see somebody who wants to know something that I know, and not give it to him. In flying school, when a new batch of kids came in, it was natural for me to think, 'Cochran, tell those fellows what you know.'⁷¹

Cochran graduated and received a reserve commission in June 1937. Bernard and Mary Cochran had brought all their sons up well. Of the five Cochran brothers, four would eventually serve in the military. Cochran's oldest brother, a lawyer, went into the Navy; Phil and two other brothers served in the Army Air Corps. In fact, Cochran's youngest brother served under him in the Air Commando Group as one of the light-plane pilots.⁷²

Langley Field and the 33d Pursuit Squadron

After graduating from pilot training, Cochran received orders to Langley Field in Virginia where he was assigned to the 33d Pursuit Squadron and again came in contact with Alison. During Cochran's time at Langley Field, the Army Air Corps was rapidly expanding the bombardment branch and taking former fighter pilots to form its initial cadre. Cochran wanted to be a fighter pilot and did whatever he could to avoid being transferred to bombardment aviation. In fact, he stated that he would rather have

⁶⁹ Liebling, 25.

⁷⁰ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 28-30.

⁷¹ Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951), 47.

⁷² Cochran, transcript of oral history, 8-9.

resigned than become a bomber pilot. Spending almost four years in the 33d, Cochran advanced from aviation cadet—a rating he held for about six months—to commanding officer.⁷³

Mitchel Field

From Langley Field, Cochran (and Alison) went to Mitchel Field in New York where he commanded the 65th Pursuit Squadron. Here again Cochran demonstrated his penchant for teaching. This time the pupil was Art Salsbury—Cochran and Alison’s housemate. When Salsbury was about to be washed out, Cochran stepped forward and asked his superiors to have a chance at teaching Salsbury. With Cochran’s help, Salsbury made it through and became a “magnificent fighter pilot.”⁷⁴

Brainard Field and the 65th Pursuit Squadron

By the latter part of 1941, Cochran was a first lieutenant in command of the 65th Pursuit Squadron and the airfield near Groton. His mission was to provide operational training to recently graduated pilots. Believing the best way to improve a pilot’s skill was to train the way he would eventually fight, Cochran promoted a “war” with a similar unit—the 64th Pursuit Squadron.⁷⁵ Cochran’s squadron won most of the battles thanks partly to an unusual early warning system. As John Bainbridge, a *Life* magazine correspondent responsible for a story about Cochran, wrote: “[Cochran] had the foresight to make friends with a chick who lived near the 64th’s field. Whenever the ‘enemy’ took off to fly toward Groton, the spotter chick warned Cochran by telephone. This gave him plenty of time to get his pilots in the air to drive the invaders off.”⁷⁶

It was while Cochran was stationed in Connecticut that his persona was immortalized as “Flip Corkin” in Milton Caniff’s comic strip, “Terry and the Pirates.” Although Cochran and Caniff knew each other at Ohio State, they were not close. When Caniff became a well-known cartoonist, mutual friends got the two together and from that

⁷³ Ibid., 33-8.

⁷⁴ Thomas, 50.

⁷⁵ John Bainbridge, “Flip Corkin,” *Life* 15, no. 6 (9 August 1943): 43.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 44.

point forward, Cochran and Caniff's friendship flourished.⁷⁷

As a joke, Caniff introduced "Flip Corkin"—an obvious caricature of Cochran—into his series.⁷⁸ What Caniff did not plan on was that this dashing, squared-jawed Air Corps officer would become very popular with the public. In fact, Air Corps public affairs officials contacted Milton and his publishing company and asked them to continue the character because parents were comforted to think that their boys were in good care while being led by the likes of Capt Corkin.⁷⁹



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Figure 6. Milton Caniff's "Flip Corkin." Like his real-life counter-part, Corkin was from Erie, PA.

⁷⁷ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 17-9.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22-3. His first squadron commander, Captain Schulgen, gave Cochran the nickname "Corkin." It seems that Schulgen—a Brooklyn Irishman—changed everyone's name to sound distinctively Irish. Cochran—an already Irish-enough name—was simply changed to Corkin. The name stuck. Caniff, seeing that not only were Cochran's flights scheduled under the name "Corkin," but also that his helmet and jacket were personalized with this name, decided to call his character "Corkin." Moreover, "Philip" was shortened to "Flip" because the comic strip character had somewhat of a flippant personality.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 21.

Cochran worked hard getting his men ready to fight—too hard. When it came time for the 65th to go overseas to support the action in North Africa, Cochran was worn down. In training and preparing the squadron that he was going to lead in combat, Cochran had overworked himself to such an extent that he was hospitalized. Lowell Thomas writes, “It was part of his character to overdo things, and he had overdone things so badly that he had developed a kind of combat fatigue.”⁸⁰ His unit went forward and he remained in the United States (U.S.) to prepare two more squadrons for overseas duty. Itching to go overseas to get into the action, Cochran somewhat patiently bided his time until he was rescued by his “patron saint,” Gen Joe Cannon.

Replacements to North Africa and the “Joker” Squadron

Cannon, Commander of First Air Force, took pity on Cochran. Needing someone that could take a bunch of inexperienced pilots and get them safely off a carrier and into action in North Africa, Cannon knew Cochran could do the job. Although not in command of a group, Cochran was happy—he was going overseas on the British carrier HMS *Archer* to deliver thirty-five replacement pilots and aircraft to his old unit, the 33d Pursuit Group.⁸¹



(Source: <http://www.hazegray.org/navhist/carriers/images/rn/d78.jpg>)

Figure 7. HMS Archer with P-40s on Deck

Neither Cochran nor his pilots had ever taken off a carrier before, and with only a few days notification before they were to leave, Cochran was pressed to get the necessary

⁸⁰ Thomas, 34.

⁸¹ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 42, 405-6. The *H.M.S. Archer* was a converted Moromacland liner that had been so top-heavy after having its deck added that its hold had to be filled with cement. Furthermore, the *Archer* was incapable of receiving aircraft, only launching them.

information. He was given a Navy regulation covering the subject but because it did not make much sense to him, he contacted a Navy lieutenant commander who talked him through the procedure over a telephone. The ship had to be moving at least fifteen knots and be pointed in to the wind.⁸²

In late October 1942, the *Archer* set sail. While underway, Cochran explained to the captain the direction and speed requirements that he had learned from the Navy commander. Not

only did the captain say that the ship's best speed was 11 knots, but also that if the launch location placed the ship in the midst of a battle, he was not going to sail around looking for the best wind direction. Things only got worse. He looked up the weight of the aircraft and found it to be much greater than the 7000-pound limitation of the catapult.⁸³

To improve his unit's chances of getting off the ship safely, Cochran decided that the P-40s had to be lightened. They removed engine covers, loaded only four of the six guns with ammunition, reduced the amount of fuel to an absolute minimum, and even drained some of the engine oil. But for all their efforts, Cochran and his men were able to reduce the weight of their P-40s to no less than 7,200 pounds.⁸⁴

When it came time to go, without thinking through the possibilities of what could go wrong, Cochran decided to be first off the deck. After getting his P-40 airborne and circling the carrier, he noticed that no other aircraft were being launched. Flying down low and breaking radio silence in search of an explanation, he was told that the catapult was broken and it would be about an hour before it was operational again. Because he had reduced the fuel to save weight, Cochran did not have enough fuel to linger. He had to leave his thirty-five men and head inland. When he arrived at the airfield, Cochran was met by General Cannon who wanted to know where the rest of Cochran's men were. Admitting his error in judgement for having gone first, Cochran explained what had happened. A short time later, his men began arriving at the airfield.⁸⁵

Upon landing at Port Lyautey in Casablanca, the inexperienced pilots did not

⁸² Ibid., 403.

⁸³ Ibid., 414-5.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 415-6.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 428-31. Of Cochran's group, four aircraft and two men were lost that day. Three aircraft were lost to pilot error; the other was lost to mechanical failure of the catapult.

handle the confusion of battle very well. Suffering from “war hysteria,” Cochran’s unit lost four aircraft landing at the airfield.⁸⁶ Because it was still in the early stages of the invasion, confusion reigned. With little need to provide replacements because of the relatively slow pace of action, Cochran took his squadron to Rabat, Morocco, where he instituted a rigorous training program.⁸⁷

Cochran put his young pilots through their paces and began to see positive results. He could see that his pilots were improving their airmanship and becoming a team. The structure of the unit developed to such a point that Cochran appointed an operations officer, an engineering officer, and flight commanders.⁸⁸ Under Cochran’s leadership, the rag-tag group of replacement pilots had formed themselves into an effective squadron. Because these men were to be replacement pilots, the group had no official numeric designation. Having formed as a squadron outside of official channels, they needed a unit identity and therefore called themselves the “Joker” Squadron.⁸⁹

Cochran, who was never one to keep his thoughts to himself when he believed he was right, had a run-in with the commander of the Free-French forces in Africa. After having been chewed out by the French general for not having had enough planes to support the ground forces, Cochran shouted, “You’ve got to fight on the ground! . . . You

⁸⁶ Philip G. Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch of Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Intelligence 3 June 1943, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 142.052. The pilots were so nervous that they cracked up the aircraft while landing.

⁸⁷ Bainbridge, 43. See also Cochran, transcript of oral history, 48-51. The Allies, having defeated the Vichy French in Morocco, were slated to take over the airfield at Rabat. Because it was decided that Cochran would take his group of pilots there to train, he was instructed to go up and check out the facilities before relocating his men. Cochran flew from Casablanca to Rabat in his P-40, landed, and taxied to an area where there were men standing in formation. Having got out of his plane, Cochran was walking towards the men when three of them stepped forward. Through some confusion, these Frenchmen thought that Cochran was the American to whom they were supposed to surrender the airdrome! Cochran played right along, saluted at the appropriate times and then requested a tour. After he had “inspected” the facilities, Cochran went back to bring his men to the newly-surrendered facility to start their training program.

⁸⁸ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 52-3.

⁸⁹ Thomas, 35. Because the Jokers were formed outside of official channels, they had no authorized support structure. As a result they had to scrounge for food, shelter and supplies. On one occasion, the unit hooked up with an infantry unit that was more than happy to share its supplies in exchange for support from its own “private” little air force. See also Liebling, 26 and Cochran, transcript of oral history, 53.

can't hide behind a rock and have planes do the whole job!"⁹⁰ The General later sent a note of apology admitting that Cochran was right.

While working his "Jokers" in Rabat, the regular Army Air Corps caught up with him. Cochran received a message from Twelfth Air Force to take six of his best pilots and their aircraft to Thelepte, Tunisia, to backfill a unit that had suffered heavy losses to the Germans.⁹¹ At a stopover along the way, Cochran was notified to stay put and await further instructions because he and his men might be sent back. Suspecting that the forward unit was having difficulties, and wanting to get up near the action, Cochran refueled his plane, flew on and caught up with the troubled unit.⁹² He had, as one author has written, "reversed the procedure of the celebrated soldier who made an advance to the rear, by telling airport officials at every stop in his journey that he was going back to Casablanca and then taking off and flying east."⁹³

Onward to Thelepte and the 58th Pursuit Squadron

Another Cochran trademark—initiative—was beginning to show through. When Cochran made it to Thelepte, he found portions of the 58th and 60th Fighter Squadrons. Having suffered heavy losses to the Germans, the group was demoralized. As Cochran recalled,

When I got up there and heard the recounting of the missions they had been sent on, naturally my sense of duty, I'll call it, made me realize that things should be a little more stable.... There I was, on an American Air Corps base, so to speak, and I saw a situation that required some doing.... [The squadron commander] needed help and he wanted it.⁹⁴

Sensing the despair and believing that he could make things better, Cochran injected himself in the Northwest African campaign. As the ranking officer, Cochran told the

⁹⁰ Brigadier General John R. Alison, "Phil Cochran: The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met!," 1.

⁹¹ Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 3-4. See also Cochran, transcript of oral history, 54 and Liebling, 26.

⁹² It was during this trip that 58th Fighter Squadron personnel at Youks-les-Bains first noticed Cochran when he helped the crew chief clean the mud from his aircraft, "Shillalah" only to fly off to Thelepte to take charge. See "History of the 58th Fighter Squadron," January 1942 – June 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file SQ-FI-58-HI, 63.

⁹³ Liebling, 26.

each of the advance parties that the squadron whose air echelon arrived first would stay on to conduct operations under his command.⁹⁵ On 14 December 1942, the air echelon of the 58th Fighter Squadron arrived at Thelepte, making it the unit that would stay on to conduct the “air guerilla warfare” under Cochran’s leadership⁹⁶

Thelepte was an advance base and the living conditions were extremely poor. Originally the 58th lived in pup tents, and along with being very cold at night, these accommodations left the men vulnerable to the frequent strafing by German fighters. Therefore, Cochran and his men dug their living quarters into the sides of ravines. Once dug in, the entrances were covered with boards over which soil was placed and desert grass planted. Although not the most luxurious of living conditions, these quarters proved to be very effective against the German attacks.⁹⁷



(Source: *Air Commando Fighters of World War II*. (North Branch, MN: Specialty Press Publishers and Wholesalers, 2000),

Figure 8. Cochran Readies for a Flight

The hectic pace (the aircrews were flying between thirty and forty missions a month) left little time to attend to the grooming standards usually expected from men in uniform. One day General Cannon arrived and observed the condition of Cochran’s men and said, “Do you mean to say that Cochran lets you go around like that?” The men

⁹⁴ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 57.

⁹⁵ Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 3-4 and History of the 58th, 63. See also Cochran, transcript of oral history, 58 and Bainbridge, 44-6.

⁹⁶ “History of the 58th Fighter, 64.

⁹⁷ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 58.

replied, “Oh hell, general, you ought to see him. He’s dirtier than we are.”⁹⁸

Another of Cochran’s qualities was his ability to read a situation, determine what adjustments were necessary and make the necessary changes—even if it meant that things were not done “by the book.”⁹⁹ Contextual elements played a role in his exercise of this freedom, however. For the first few months at Thelepte, Cochran’s outfit was the forward base of American airpower. His group was all alone and no one was around telling him how to conduct his operations. As a result, Cochran made his own adjustments to counter the threat. Cochran recalled, “We started to form our own methods and we changed our formation; we changed tactics as went along to try to overcome the adversities that would face us. ...[W]e were unconsciously setting new strategies and...tactical methods.”¹⁰⁰

Being out on the edge with little supervision, Cochran knew what had to be done and did it. But only after he got his men firmly grounded in the basics did he move on to different tactics.¹⁰¹ Because he saw his unit at a material disadvantage to the Germans, Cochran thought fighting a guerilla-type action was most appropriate.¹⁰²

Cochran consciously watched the Germans operate, trying to learn their routines. While doing so, he dreamed up plans to catch them in a trap and use their weaknesses against them. During the first six months of the African campaign, the Germans pilots frequently flew over the airfield and dropped notes challenging the Americans to battle. Cochran, of course, was game. “We would go over and make a...thing of beating the hell out of something that [the Germans] should have been protecting, and we would say, ‘All

⁹⁸ Thomas, 39-40.

⁹⁹ Because Cochran had observed that the Germans previously attacked a couple of times each at dawn and dusk, he believed that they were prepared for something different and boldly predicted that the Germans would attack that day at 1430 hours in the afternoon. At 1428, seven Junkers 88s and eight Messerschmitts appeared over the field but Cochran was ready with seven fighters in the air. The following day, Cochran predicted that if the Germans did not attack at 1030 hours, then they would strike at 1745. At 1755, Cochran was about ready to land only to be alerted by the controller that enemy aircraft had been detected. Cochran likened this uncanny ability to “sensing when to hop on or off a guy who is shooting craps.” See Liebling, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 13-4.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 58

¹⁰² Bainbridge, 46. See also “History of the 58th Fighter, 63, 68. The unit’s historian described Cochran’s method as a “hit and run air campaign.”

right, you arrogant bastards, we'll show you a little bit of what we are made of, too.'"¹⁰³

As the war progressed, the Germans became reluctant to fight so Cochran's men tried—with little success—to force them into battle. With these failed attempts, Cochran's men started bombing and strafing militarily significant targets like headquarters, freight cars, trucks, and locomotives. They even enjoyed limited success in low-level skip bombing attacks against bridges and ships.¹⁰⁴ Once, Cochran's men caught one-hundred Italian trucks hiding in an olive grove. Eighty-seven were destroyed at a loss of one pilot. Because these attacks were so successful, the Germans stopped daylight movement of their equipment.¹⁰⁵

As fighter pilots, Cochran and his men were not schooled in providing close air support and interdiction—it was something that they picked up along the way. It is a credit to Cochran's leadership that in spite of this fact, the 58th worked extensively with ground forces in those roles.¹⁰⁶ This level of support did not go unnoticed by those in higher command. General James H. Doolittle, commander of US air forces in North Africa, came to meet Cochran and his men to compliment them on the air support that they had been providing to the ground troops. Cochran, having been asked by Doolittle if there was anything he needed, requested more airplanes. Doolittle, true to word, delivered on the promise. Within a short time, Cochran's unit received seventy-five

¹⁰³ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 12-13, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Cochran had experimented with strapping 500-pound bombs to his unit's P-40 Warhawks. See Thomas, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 8. Due to the relentless daylight attacks by Cochran's men, the Germans started hiding their equipment in haystacks. From then on, suspicious looking haystacks were attacked with great results. Having learned that the Germans had only a small number of locomotives for their train system in the area, Cochran "thought it would be amusing to bag a few." Before attacking the trains, however, Cochran's men always "buzzed" them to give the French operators a chance to get clear. See Brainbridge, 46

¹⁰⁶ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 72-73. Cochran believed, however, that the ground forces, instead of taking advantages of the unique capabilities that air provided, were wasting it by asking it to do the jobs that the ground forces could do themselves. Also, in an earlier discussion on air support to ground forces, Cochran stated the following, "I think we ought to tie the ground people to the air force and call it ground support of air. It is actually, what is being done. And I think that is the way we will end up." See Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch 12-3.

brand new P-40s.¹⁰⁷

Originally when Cochran's group went to Thelepte, they were all alone, but as time went on, more units joined them. First, it was a squadron of P-40s from the 33d Pursuit Group; next, a squadron of A-20s arrived; and finally, the group was joined by a number of P-39s.¹⁰⁸ As the radar, headquarters staff, and intelligence units arrived, Cochran's men transitioned from fighting an aerial guerilla war to fighting more conventionally.¹⁰⁹ When the 33d Fighter Group staff arrived, things were done in a different way. Cochran, who became the operations officer with the arrival of Lt Col William Momyer, reoriented his men to provide escort for the medium bombers.¹¹⁰ Cochran expressed how he felt a few months later, "This was good for the war—but poor for us. We were no longer free. Finally we got scientific and did it the way the book said."¹¹¹

Again Cochran was pushing himself to his limits but he was concerned only with the health of his men. The terrible living conditions and the non-stop operations had begun to take their toll. Cochran could see it and asked General Doolittle to send a professional down to evaluate his men for combat fatigue. After the psychologist had made his rounds, Cochran asked him if he had a list of men whom he was going to recommend be sent for some rest and relaxation. The doctor said that he did have a list and that Cochran's name was at the top of it. The doctor stated, "After I talked to you, I found out you're the worst one of all."¹¹²

On 5 February 1943, after almost two months in "Hell's Hole," the 58th Fighter Squadron was ordered to prepare for a withdrawal for a well deserved rest. While preparing to leave and reflecting on their accomplishments, the unit's historian fondly wrote, "No banners [are] needed to designate the hearty camaraderie of men and pilots

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, 36 and Cochran, transcript of oral history, 94-5. Although the 58th had been making a name for itself by accomplishing a lot, the equipment was getting worn out because Thelepte was a difficult place to properly maintain aircraft.

¹⁰⁸ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 76-8.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁰ "History of the 58th Fighter, 82 and Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 19.

¹¹¹ Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 19.

¹¹² Cochran, transcript of oral history, 101-2.

with Major Phillip [sic] Cochran—none of these things need to be written.”¹¹³

Cochran, for his part, reflected on this experience in much the same way as he did with all of his other adventures—giving credit for a job well done to those who worked for him. He recalled, “The story...of Thelepte and the whole business for that matter, is that our people, our boys and pilots, are wonderful. Without the spirit of the ‘plain American guy’ you couldn’t have done it. It would be just impossible.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, “American airmen—mechanics and pilots alike—are leaders in everything—they can and do start from absolutely nothing, and the worst things you can throw at people...and still continue to do a job.”¹¹⁵

Northwest African Training Command

Many of the replacement aircrews that were arriving in theater were fresh out of initial training and had never practiced crucial skills like firing their guns in the air. Recognizing this, the Army Air Corps decided that incoming forces should not have to go through the same learning curve that Cochran’s troops had to go through. To remedy this situation, General Cannon, took full advantage of the lull between Rommel’s defeat and the push into Sicily and established the Northwest African Training Command. It was seeded with battle-hardened aviators and Cochran was a logical choice to pass on the lessons he had learned. Newly arrived groups—temporarily led by men with theater combat experience—would receive a thorough theater indoctrination to include proper formations and aerial gunnery practice. Although the commander who had brought the group over would maintain administrative responsibility over the group during this concentrated combat training, the in-theater experienced aviator oversaw the operational training.¹¹⁶

After having trained a few of these groups, Cochran was presented with a bigger challenge. He was to prepare the 99th Pursuit Squadron—an all African-American squadron better known as the Tuskegee Airmen—for combat. Although, the 99th had been supplied with very good equipment, Cochran saw that they were the least prepared

¹¹³ “History of the 58th Fighter, 93-4.

¹¹⁴ Cochran, interview with Interrogation Branch, 12-3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 19-20 and Cochran, transcript of oral history, 119-21.

unit for combat of any group he had seen. He did not blame the men; rather the unit was the victim of the circumstances from which it had been formed. The 99th had no unit history; they had no 'old timers' from whom to learn; and their commanding officer had no more experience than the least experienced person in the squadron. Originally wanting to parcel out the 99th to more experienced units so the pilots could learn much in the same way as any other group, Cochran was over-ruled. There was to be no integration; the 99th was to remain intact. Therefore, much in the same way that he had worked with the Joker Squadron, Cochran took the 99th to an isolated airfield where he prepared them to go to war.¹¹⁷

Back to the United States

In June 1943, Cochran's rigorous pace caught up with him. Diagnosed with "cumulative fatigue," he was sent back to the U.S. for some rest and relaxation, after which he was to receive a group command and be sent to Europe to fight the "real war."¹¹⁸ Before Cochran left for the U.S., Generals Carl A. 'Tooey' Spaatz and Cannon told him that they had set up a briefing between him and Arnold in an attempt to change the inefficient and unwise practice of sending untrained units to the theater to be trained. In what Cochran later described as one of the nicest things that ever happened to him, Spaatz—without impressing upon Cochran a "company line"—fully trusted him to present the right message to Arnold.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 121-5. Cochran enjoyed working with the 99th and was impressed by the pilots' abilities to fly formation and precisely land the aircraft. Although he identified their main weaknesses as navigational skills and knowing how to use their superb technical abilities, Cochran noted that the 99th adapted and caught on to the new formations better than any other unit he had seen.

¹¹⁸ Cochran was diagnosed with "cumulative fatigue" more than once during his military career. Although the symptoms are similar, Cochran actually suffered from hypoglycemia. Diagnosed with this condition before the war, Cochran never revealed it to the military because he knew that he would not have been allowed to fly. See Cochran, transcript of oral history, 128, 332-3.

¹¹⁹ Cochran, transcript of oral history, 129-33. Cochran recalled that at the harbor, before boarding his ship, Spaatz gave the following instructions. "All right, Cochran, you're going home and you are going to be questioned and you're going to get a chance to tell our story. I want you to come right out with it. You tell them what we are going through over here and you give it to them as straight as you can give it to them." When Cochran stated that he would, he paused as if to let Spaatz go on. When no more advice was

Cochran made it back to the states, told his story to the Air Staff. and after a short leave in Erie, was sent to the First Air Force at Mitchel Field where he was to fix the problems he had previously briefed. Moving from group to group, preparing them to go overseas, Cochran passed on the lessons that he had learned in North Africa in typical Cochran fashion. Not only did he get to know the pilots and their families, but he also drank beer at night with them—all the while talking to them about what they were doing wrong and right. Cochran sensed their eagerness to learn and did all he could to satisfy their appetite. Although he put in many hours flying with them, practicing aerial dogfights and trying to overcome mistaken ideas, Cochran found it hard to shake the young pilots' beliefs that their P-47 would not be used in the air-to-ground role.¹²⁰

Although Cochran had never flown the P-47 in combat, he knew that “any airplane with eight .50-caliber guns in it is going to be used on the ground.”¹²¹ In an attempt to establish credibility for himself, Cochran talked the First Air Force commander into letting him go to Europe for a short time to get experience in the Thunderbolt so that he could teach from the “been there, done that” perspective. His argument was convincing and he was scheduled to go to Europe, but Cochran's plans were dashed when he received a telegram telling him to report to General Arnold's office in Washington.¹²²

offered, Cochran said, “Now what is it exactly that you want me to get across?” To which Spaatz snapped back, “Well, hell. I'm not going to tell you. You've lived it! I'm not going to tell you what to say. You get over there and say it!”

¹²⁰ Ibid., 134-9.

¹²¹ Ibid., 140.

¹²² Ibid., 140-2.

Chapter 4

JOHN R. ALISON – BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

A pleasing and alert personality, well-liked by all with whom he worked. Keen, cooperative and cool-headed.

Brigadier General Raymond Lee, Military Attaché (London)
Evaluation Report of 1Lt John R. Alison

Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the life of the second subject of this leadership study—John R. Alison. I discuss his humble beginnings in Micanopy, Florida, his attempts to join the US Navy, and his “temporary duty” assignments working Lend-Lease programs for the British and Soviets. Alison’s flying skills are legendary. I discuss examples of his skill as I present his flying and combat assignments prior to his interview with General Arnold for the Burma operation.

Civilian Life

On 21 November 1912, John Alison was born to Grover and Edelweiss (Price) Alison in Micanopy, Florida, a small town just south of Gainesville, near Lake Orange.¹²³ He was the eldest of three boys. His father worked in the lumber business, making a

¹²³ John R. Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 22 – 28 April 1979, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1121, 1-2 and Military Personnel Record of John R. Alison, Personal Fact Sheet.

modest living, but providing adequately for his wife and three sons.¹²⁴ Alison grew up in Micanopy and attended high school in Gainesville. Despite being only 5 feet, 5 ¾ inches tall, Alison made his presence known throughout the school—he was president of his high school class, he started as an end on the football team, and he captained the swim team.¹²⁵

Alison's interest in aviation began early. As a youngster he was fascinated by the barnstormers who would fly into town in their "Jennies" and take people for rides. Unable to persuade his parents to allow him to go on one of these rides, his desire for flying lay dormant until one day it was re-awakened, when, while sitting in study hall at his high school, a brother of a friend of the family who was a lieutenant in the Army Air Corps buzzed the school in a Curtiss P-1. Referring to this event, Alison remarked, "I heard that sound and said, 'I think that's something I would like to do.'"¹²⁶

Alison's parents, seeing that they were not going to talk their son out of his interest in flying, took a more pro-active approach. Believing his son might become airsick and then lose all interest in flying if given the chance, Alison's father gave a traveling flight instructor a used automobile in exchange for flying lessons for John. Alison took the lessons, did not get sick, and certainly did not lose interest in flying. If anything, the desire became stronger. In fact, Alison was about to solo when his father, upset that his plan had not worked, told the flight instructor, "You can have the car. It belongs to you, but no more lessons."¹²⁷

College Life

Alison attended the University of Florida at Gainesville. As was the case in high school, he took to "politics" and sports, being elected president of his college fraternity

¹²⁴ John R. Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, Jr., 27 January 1977, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1065, 2 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 2.

¹²⁵ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 1 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 7-8. In describing how he—at 5 feet 5 and ¾ inches—could play end in football for his high school team, Alison—in his typical self-deprecating style—stated, "the only reason, I guess, that I was able to play and make the team was the fact that there just wasn't much talent around."

¹²⁶ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 5-6.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 14-5.

and winning the university's intramural wrestling championship on more than one occasion.¹²⁸

Alison originally signed up for mechanical engineering because he thought it would increase his odds of getting accepted to the Army flying school. Because one could be accepted into the Army Cadet Flying program with just two years of college, Alison was also tempted to leave school to earn his wings. Fortunately, his mother persuaded him to finish his degree. But not wanting to get stuck in the technical mire of an engineering job—and fascinated with the business aspect of the profession—Alison, on his dean's suggestion, signed up to take an additional two years of business administration. Finishing college with three years of engineering and two years of business administration, Alison received an Industrial Engineering degree in 1935.¹²⁹



(Source: Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA))

Figure 9. 1st Lt John R. Alison

¹²⁸ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 1 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 7.

¹²⁹ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 4-5.

Attempts to Join the Navy

Two of Alison's closest friends from college—both a year ahead of him because of his detour into business administration—had joined the Navy. Although Alison's real desire was to join the Army Air Corps, his desire to join up with his old friends won out. Alison went to Pensacola to take the Navy's physical examination, but failed. He did not measure up—literally. The Navy's height requirement was 5 feet, 6 inches. At 5 feet, 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches, Alison was $\frac{1}{4}$ inch too short for Navy standards.¹³⁰

Although Alison contacted his US Senator in an attempt to get a waiver, it was to no avail. The Navy would not budge. Clearly aggravated, Alison said, "to hell with the Navy" and arranged to take the Army Air Corps' physical examination at Maxwell Field in Montgomery, Alabama. The Army height requirement was 5 feet, 4 inches. In the end, things worked out just fine for Alison even though his attempts to join the Navy had thrown off his Air Corps application and subsequent induction into flight training by a couple of weeks. As Alison recalled, "I got to Randolph [two] weeks late, and I missed the first [two] weeks of hazing, much to my delight."¹³¹

Into the Military

In 1936 Alison went to Randolph Field for primary and basic flight training and then moved on to Kelly Field for advanced training. Although he started in the PT-3, a biplane, his was the first class to fly the new, low-wing, all-metal monoplanes. His flight was assigned the Seversky BT-8.¹³² Alison's college days had prepared him well for the academics of flying training. He had no problems at all and was designated an academic honor student. He excelled at flying, too. The only problem he had was related to his height. The P-12 and Keystone bomber did not have adjustable seats so Alison had the parachute shop make a four-inch cushion which, combined with a parachute pack, made

¹³⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

¹³¹ Ibid., 12.

¹³² Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 5.

the seat height just about right.¹³³

At flight school Alison honed his flying skills to a sharp edge. For reasons beyond his control, he got more solo hours than most others did because he had been assigned an instructor whose flying was limited due to a heart problem. After being told on the ground what he should do and how to do it, Alison would go up and execute the appropriate maneuvers. At the end of his training, Alison had accumulated 320 hours and, being in the first flying class to be commissioned after completion of training, received his wings and was commissioned into the Army Air Corps Reserves. In July 1937 he was assigned to Langley Field in Virginia where he shared a house with his friend, Phil Cochran.¹³⁴

Langley Field

Alison had mixed feelings about his assignment to Langley Field. On one hand, it was a great opportunity for him to meet some of the central figures of American airpower, as it was the home of Hq, GHQ Air Force. During his time there, Alison was able to interact with Carl Spaatz, Curtis Lemay, Robert Olds, Frank Andrews, and William Momyer.¹³⁵ On the other hand, Alison's first year at Langley Field did not live up to his expectations in terms of flying. Because of limited funds and some high visibility flying accidents, flying hours were controlled very closely. Moreover, Alison found himself filling non-flying positions like airdrome officer. He was so disappointed that he told his commanding officer he was going resign. Promising Alison that things would get better, his commander convinced him to stay on. The situation did get better. Alison was assigned as the deputy operations officer and flew many more hours than he had previously.¹³⁶

¹³³ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 21-31. Alison also had to have a pack made for his back because his legs were too short to reach the pedals.

¹³⁴ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 8 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 32-3, 48.

¹³⁵ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 35-7.

¹³⁶ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 10-4.



(Source: Air AFHRA)

Figure 10. 33d Pursuit Squadron Staff in front of a P-36 (l-r) unidentified, Maj Russell Maughan, Lt Cochran, Lt Alison

After Alison had been at Langley for six months, the Thomas Act was passed. This legislation allowed those officers with Reserve appointments to take competitive exams for a Regular commission. Again, Alison's strong academic background served him well. He took the exam along with every other eligible officer at Langley that year and was one of only two officers to be awarded Regular commissions.¹³⁷

Alison continually sought to improve his flying skills. Remembering how he and his fellow pilots tested themselves against each other he stated, "We did a lot of individual air-to-air combat, trying to work out tactics, ways of doing it. We practiced individual air-to-air combat at Langley a great deal, and then by the time we got to Mitchel, we had honed it to what we thought was a fine art."¹³⁸ In other instances, Alison had to "step around" the regulations to improve his skills. During part of his time at Langley Field, a string of aircraft accidents in the Air Corps caused superiors to place

¹³⁷ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 39.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 48-9.

many restrictions upon the pilots. One regulation prohibited acrobatics. Realizing that these restrictions would reduce his combat effectiveness, Alison used the lights of Norfolk, Newport News, and Hampton, Virginia, to practice his acrobatics at night, well beyond the eyes of his superiors.¹³⁹

In late 1940, the Air Corps was expanding. As a result, after having spent nearly four years at Langley Field, Alison was transferred to Mitchel Field, New York, where he was to serve as operations officer of the 8th Pursuit Group.¹⁴⁰

Mitchel Field and the 8th Pursuit Group

By the time Alison arrived in New York, his reputation for airmanship was well known. On one occasion, the 8th Pursuit Group was asked to send a pilot and an airplane to Bolling Field in Washington, DC, to demonstrate the capabilities of the P-40 Warhawk to Gen Claire Chennault and some visiting Chinese dignitaries. Alison, by then a first lieutenant and known for being a “great stick,” was selected. Arriving at Bolling Field, Alison went directly to the commander’s office where he was met by Chennault, the Chinese, and two Curtiss-Wright representatives. Alison asked what kind of demonstration the visitors wanted. By this time the Curtiss-Wright representatives were getting nervous. Doubting Alison’s abilities because of his small stature, they asked if their test pilot could demonstrate the aircraft. Alison was willing but the commanding general said it would be too difficult to get proper authorization and told Alison to do his best.¹⁴¹

Alison had spent so much time flying the Warhawk that he knew exactly what he could get out of the P-40 and its engine. The aircraft he was flying that day was significantly lighter than standard P-40s since it had been stripped of all unnecessary weight. Although the engine was limited to 980 horsepower, Alison knew he could “over-boost” it and get away with it for a short time. As he remembered,

I got the airplane down at the end of the runway and pointed it into the wind and started my takeoff run, pushed power up to 980 horsepower...
The airplane starts running down the runway, and because of the wind, it

¹³⁹ Ibid., 21-31.

¹⁴⁰ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 19 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 46-7.

¹⁴¹ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 55-7.

is airborne very shortly. ... By the time I passed the reviewing party right there on the edge of the runway, the gear was fairly well up. Just as I passed them, I boosted the airplane up to its max boost. I listened for about two or three seconds and the engine took it fine, no problem at all. ... I just pulled it right straight up and did an Immelmann right back over and went in the other direction.... I came back at a reasonable altitude and did a slow roll, cut the throttle back, and came down, and I put my wingtip right at about 100 feet on the Chinese and Chennault and I did about five turns at max power.... I headed right back down the runway, downwind, pulled it up, and did a split-S and landed out of the split-S and taxied in. I couldn't have been airborne 2 minutes.¹⁴²

Amazed, the Chinese general said, “We need one hundred of these.” And in what Alison later said was the finest compliment ever paid to him, Chennault, tapped Alison on the chest and said, “No, what you need is 100 of these.”¹⁴³

The group at Mitchel was made up of three squadrons. One was commanded by Cochran; one by Romulus Puryear; the other by John Aiken. Tragically, Aiken was killed in a training accident and Alison took over command of Aiken's squadron in addition to his job as group operations officer.¹⁴⁴ Not long after John Aiken's death Alison received temporary duty (TDY) orders to England along with Hubert “Hub” Zemke. Alison had not been at Mitchel Field very long but the State department wanted their operations and maintenance expertise to help the English with the 1,000 P-40s being transferred under the Lend-Lease program. Although he was supposed to have been TDY for only a couple of months, his overseas travels lasted nearly three years.¹⁴⁵

Lend-Lease to Great Britain

Before leaving the U.S. on their military assistance visit, Alison and Zemke met with General Arnold. At that meeting, Arnold assured the men that Col Elwood Quesada would provide everything they needed. Zemke, knowing the type of work that they

¹⁴² Ibid., 57-9.

¹⁴³ Maj Gen Claire Lee Chennault, *Way of A Fighter: The Memoirs of Claire Lee Chennault* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1949), 101-2. See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 59. Chennault stated that Alison “got more out of the P-40 in his five-minute demonstration than anybody [he] saw before or after.”

¹⁴⁴ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 47.

would likely find, requested a set of technical orders for the P-40. Alison and Zemke left for England in late March 1941 and although Quesada had promised that the documents would be in England waiting with the aircraft, there were none. Alison and Zemke spent the next four relatively uneventful months doing the best they could without the manuals. Working directly with Royal Air Force (RAF) aircrews and maintenance personnel, the two American airmen taught them all they knew about the P-40.¹⁴⁶

On one occasion, one of England's top Hurricane aces—Wing Commander John Carey—and Alison were comparing aircraft capabilities. Alison told Carey that the P-40 was a better aircraft than he had been giving it credit for. To settle the matter, Carey challenged Alison to a mock dogfight. On the first go, Carey—in his stripped-down Hurricane—and Alison—in his P-40—flew to a draw before Alison's aircraft had a fuel problem. Having landed and fixed the fuel problem, Alison once again took to the skies. This time Alison got on Carey's tail and stayed there. On the ground, an impressed British ace approached Alison and said, "I just didn't really know the airplane would fly as well as that. When we were talking on the ground, I really didn't have a feeling that you Yanks would be as competent as you are." Alison could have been cocky, but that was not his style. Instead, he responded in his typical gentlemanly way: "Well Wing Commander Carey," he said, "coming from a guy who has a record like you, that's quite a compliment and I appreciate it."¹⁴⁷

In the summer of 1941, while Alison was working with an RAF squadron, he received a message telling him to report to the Embassy with everything he had. When he arrived he was told that he would be accompanying the President's special emissary—Mr. Harry Hopkins—and General Joseph McNarney on their trip to Russia to arrange Lend-Lease assistance. In July 1941, Alison and the others left by train on the first leg of their trip to the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 19, 39 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 51, 61, 70.

¹⁴⁶ John R. Alison, interviewed by the author, 12 December 2000. See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 67, 88, 94.

¹⁴⁷ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 67-8.

¹⁴⁸ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 73.

Lend-Lease to Russia

After the train had pulled out of the station, Mr. Hopkins suggested a nightcap for everyone before retiring for the evening. When Hopkins asked Alison what he wanted, Alison explained that he did not drink alcohol and ordered a soft drink. The next day before dinner, Hopkins again offered an alcoholic drink to Alison. Alison thanked him,

Figure 11. Col Alison, circa 1944

(Source: USAF Collection in *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951))



but declined saying once again that he did not drink alcoholic beverages. The following day, when the cycle was repeated, Hopkins said with “a twinkle in his eye,” “You know, I don’t really care whether you drink or not, but please don’t be so damned superior.”¹⁴⁹

Upon their arrival in the Soviet Union at Archangel—a port city situated on the Northern Dvina River—Alison’s group was taken to a yacht for a state dinner. As was customary in the Soviet Union, there were numerous toasts but Alison got by with drinking water. Then, a Russian general stood and proposed a toast specifically to Alison. Not wanting to embarrass his country with its newest ally, Alison, who had never even tasted whiskey before, raised the glass of vodka and drank it down. As he sat down, tears began to come to his eyes and Harry Hopkins laughed and looked at Alison and said, “Well Alison, that shows a definite lack of character.”¹⁵⁰ The next day, the group was flown to Moscow.

¹⁴⁹ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 72-3.

¹⁵⁰ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 78-80. See also Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951), 44-6. Although Hopkins was certainly kidding, Phil Cochran thought that Alison had shown the strength of his character by drinking in those situations. Cochran later explained, “John’s drinking was really an exhibition of strength of character. He was doing it because it was part of his job. ... A lot of people got sick, and had to leave, or passed out. But not John. There he sat, putting away the vodka with the best of the Ruskies.”

With the initial meetings complete, Hopkins concluded his trip with the decision to send the P-40s in England to the Soviets.¹⁵¹ Alison was to remain behind to await the shipment from England and, because it was going to be some time before the aircraft (and Zemke) arrived, Alison was made the Assistant Military Attaché for Air and was assigned to the American Embassy in Moscow.¹⁵²

Alison displayed incredible ingenuity and maturity in this assignment. When the ship carrying the Warhawks arrived, Alison flew to Archangel to meet them and Zemke. After the crates were unloaded, they were driven to a timber airstrip that had been built with prison labor.¹⁵³ The Soviets uncrated and assembled the aircraft and Alison and Zemke checked-out and test-flew every one of them. All of this was done without any technical orders. Alison and Zemke exercised sound judgment and learned to be independent in this far-off assignment. Communications were poor and although they were supported only by three RAF mechanics, these two airmen were directing the entire American part of operation.¹⁵⁴

During the American effort to supply the Soviets with Lend-Lease equipment, US shipping was taking quite a beating from the German U-boat campaign. A plan was

Through a different example, Cochran elaborated, "If a Chinese invites you to his house and gets out the rice wine, he says *Gombay*. That means drink the whole thing down. You must do it and John did. ... John sensed [that the Chinese thought white men could not take drinking] and, every time the Chinese said *Gombay*, he downed the rice wine. They didn't reckon with this little fellow. John had a terrific competitive spirit. Everything he does is competition. He was holding up the American end and said no Chinese would drink us under. It was competition and he won."

¹⁵¹ Many of the 1000 P-40s sent to England were still in their crates and because the Battle of Britain was over as was the threat of a Nazi invasion, the authorities made the decision to send a number of the P-40s to the Soviet Union. See Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 70-1.

¹⁵² Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 83-4.

¹⁵³ The Soviet prisoners, after cutting the trees, put down the first set longitudinally then put a second set across the first. Then they spiked in 6 inches square timbers on top of the two layers of trees. Not only did they build a 5000 foot runway in this manner, but also taxiways and dispersal areas.

¹⁵⁴ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 85-9, 93-4. When Alison and Zemke discovered that there were no technical orders included in the shipment of P-40s, they immediately wired back to the United States requesting a set. When Alison left the Soviet Union after seven months, he received word that they had finally arrived in Vladivostok and were being sent to Moscow via railroad.

proposed to have American pilots deliver airplanes directly to the Soviet-German front via Alaska and Siberia. Alison and the other military attaches were to prepare all the necessary information to establish the ferry route. Having been told by officials in Washington, DC, that the Soviets had approved the release of information, Alison approached his Soviet counterparts. Apparently there had been some sort of disconnect between the Soviet Embassy in Washington and officials in the Soviet Union because Alison was promised the information but it never came. Growing impatient, Washington again cabled the American Embassy in Moscow and stressed the importance and short suspense for the required information. Alison again visited his counterparts but received no help. After about a month without results and believing that the attaches were not doing their jobs, Washington sent a team led by Lt Col Townsend Griffiss—General George C. Marshall’s personal representative—to figure out what was going on.¹⁵⁵

Having been briefed on the situation, Griffiss arranged for a meeting with Soviet officials from the Foreign Ministry. Again, the Soviets played the same games and after more than a month, Griffiss was fed up. Realizing the U.S. would never get the necessary information, he sent a cable to Washington and announced to the embassy that he was flying back to the Pentagon. Hearing that Griffiss was leaving, Alison explained to him his great desire to get back to the fighter business and asked if he could accompany him back to the U.S.. Obviously sympathetic to Alison’s cause, Griffiss said Alison could accompany him even though there were no orders to do so. Everything would be okay, Griffiss explained, because he was acting with General Marshall’s authority. Not wanting to be considered ‘absent without leave’ (AWOL), Alison checked with the chief military attaché and the ambassador. Both understood Alison’s wish to return home and gave their consent for him to leave with Griffiss.¹⁵⁶

Although they were scheduled to leave Kuibyshev towards the end of December 1941, Griffiss and Alison—now with the rank of captain—were delayed until January

¹⁵⁵ John R. Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001. See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 109-17. In reference to the general level of cooperation received from the Soviets, Alison remarks, “We went as friends, and they were sitting on the opposite side of the table as adversaries.”

¹⁵⁶ Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001. See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 119-122.

due to weather. After leaving the Soviet Union, one of the stops on the trip was Tehran, Persia. While at the American Mission conducting some business, Griffiss began to have second thoughts about bringing Alison back without written orders. He told Alison that it would save both of them some trouble if Alison would stay in Tehran until he sent for him. Griffiss went on to explain that in London he would have access to a transatlantic phone and that he would talk to General Marshall personally. Finally, he promised to get orders to Alison within a week.¹⁵⁷

From Persia to Russia. Alison was not one to sit around idle. Faced with at least a week without anything to do, Alison told Griffiss that he had learned from State Department officials that some American ships were going to be arriving in the Basra area with A-20s, which were to be delivered to the Russians. He indicated that he would go down and see if they could use his help. Griffiss accompanied Alison to the railroad station to say goodbye. He said, “All right, I will see you in Washington. . . . Don’t worry, John, just as soon as I have a chance to talk to General Marshall, your orders will be on the way.” That was the last time Alison ever saw or talked to Townsend Griffiss.¹⁵⁸

Upon arriving in Basra, Alison found the headquarters of the American engineers at a date plantation along the banks of the Shatt-al-Arab. Because the commander was away, Alison met with the deputy commander, Colonel Don Shingler, to ask permission to stay on and provide assistance. Shingler, obviously pleased that Alison was an Air Corps officer, explained that his unit was receiving A-20s to be shipped to Russia and asked Alison if he would help his lone Air Corps lieutenant and two non-commissioned officers with the program. Alison whole-heartedly agreed.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Military Personnel Record of John R. Alison, Officer Military Record, AF Form 11, 31 December 1958. See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 123-8 Alison and the embassy staff were in Kuibyshev (500 miles to the southeast on the plains near the Volga River) because the Germans had driven the diplomatic corps out of Moscow.

¹⁵⁸ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000, Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 128-30.

¹⁵⁹ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000, Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 158-61.

Alison who had never flown an A-20 went down to the RAF facility where the planes were being received and met the lieutenant who immediately checked him out in the aircraft. Not only did all of the A-20s need to be test-flown, but all the Soviet pilots needed to be checked out in the airplane as well. Although it was a single-pilot aircraft, the A-20 had a tunnel behind the pilot in which a man could lie down. Alison recalled, “We would stretch the Russians out and have them lie down and then we would take the airplane up and demonstrate to them the flight characteristics of the airplane...single-engine performance, stall, approach...and takeoff speeds, the things once a pilot has seen he will have no trouble with the airplane.”¹⁶⁰

Over a month went by and Alison still had not heard from Griffiss when he learned that the aircraft in which Griffiss was a passenger was misidentified off the English coast and was shot down by Spitfires. Everyone on board had perished. After learning of Griffiss’ death, Alison sent a message to Arnold stating where he was and what he was doing. He wrote that he did not want to return to the Soviet Union, that Americans were needed in the Middle East for more important things, and that he would remain there do his best until Arnold said otherwise. At the bottom of the letter he wrote, “Just as soon as you can, please attach me to a tactical unit and send me to a combat theater.”¹⁶¹

Some time later, the first of a large shipment of American B-25s bound for Russia arrived at the RAF airstrip where Alison was working. The pilot, a retired Pan-American (PAN-AM) airline pilot, told Alison he had to either sign for the plane or he was going to fly it back to the U.S. Not knowing anything about this Lend Lease program, Alison called his supervisor who told him to sign for the aircraft. Before the PAN-AM pilot left, he took Alison up to check him out in the aircraft. After Alison had landed the plane three times, the contract pilot said, “Okay son, you are checked out. It’s all yours.”¹⁶²

Alison was extremely busy in the Middle East. Not only did he participate in and

¹⁶⁰ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 162-3.

¹⁶¹ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000, Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 129-30, 154.

¹⁶² Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 129-30, 154.

supervise the maintenance activities, he also personally checked out every pilot that the Soviets sent to receive aircraft. To make matters worse, the Soviets never sent the same pilot twice—every pilot was new and had to be checked out in the aircraft. Thanks to his time in the Soviet Union, Alison was able to prepare the pilots without an interpreter although only minimally so. Furthermore, all of the B-25s had been marked to indicate safe operating limits. Once again, as was the case back in the Soviet Union, Alison found himself responsible for delivering aircraft to the Russians without any technical orders. To make matters worse, he was expected to check the Soviet pilots out in the aircraft even though he had only one flight in the airplane and no operating instructions. Alison made do, however. He recruited the American Mission's chauffeur, who had some experience with tank radios, two RAF electricians, and some Iraqis for manual labor. In addition, Alison put to work the Douglas Aircraft Company technical representatives who were there helping him with the A-20s. With their combined efforts, Alison was able to ensure that the planes were in safe flying condition.¹⁶³

Alison experienced the same type of frustration with the Soviets in the Middle East as he had in Moscow and Kuibyshev. This time, however, it had to do with the condition of the aircraft being delivered. The Soviets insisted that the aircraft be “perfect” before accepting them. On one occasion, the long hours of difficult work and Soviet insistence on perfection caught up with Alison. He had just finished getting an aircraft ready for delivery when he noticed that one of the tires had been partially cut from landing on the gravel runway. This “major” defect did not go unnoticed by the Soviet inspectors. They told Alison that the plane was unsafe and that they were not going to accept it.¹⁶⁴ That was enough for Alison. As he tells it,

I was not only frustrated, but I was upset. I said, ‘I am going to show you how safe that airplane is. ... I am going to show you how much shock that landing gear will take.’ ... I just pulled it off and made a very short turn around the field and I came back and just deliberately dropped it in. The B-25 was very rugged. I just dropped it in. I opened the throttle and went around and dropped it in again. ... I think I dropped it in five times, put on the brakes hard, turned around, and pulled up to the line. I said, ‘See

¹⁶³ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 167-9, 176.

¹⁶⁴ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 170-5.

there. I can't break that tire. No way can I break that tire. None of your pilots will ever land it that hard.'¹⁶⁵

After a short discussion, the Soviet inspectors returned and said that they could not accept the aircraft. Throwing his hands up, Alison said, "Well, I will be a son of a bitch. I'm through." As he was walking away, Alison's true self came through. He returned to the chief Soviet inspector and apologized, explaining that his unit had no spare parts and that that aircraft was a good fighting machine. The Soviet inspector, while sympathetic to Alison's argument, explained that although Alison believed that the U.S. was giving the Soviets the aircraft, the inspectors' superiors had told them that they were buying them. As such, the aircraft, once flown to Moscow, were examined again and any deficiencies were counted against the original inspectors. Alison said he understood and agreed to run the transfer in the manner the Soviets wanted.¹⁶⁶

The B-25 transfer operation was moved to Tehran and living and working conditions improved significantly. Co-located at the Tehran facility was the Persian Air Force headquarters. Soon Alison was giving rides to the Persian officers and enlisted men alike. In fact, at times, he even let them fly the aircraft. These flights were so well received that some Persian Air Force officers asked Alison if he would take their Minister of War for a flight, which he did. Without going through protocol or proper channels, an impressed Minister of War asked, and Alison agreed to take the Shah for a flight. Alison would never take the Shah on that flight, however. The day before the flight, Alison



Figure 12. (l-r) Maj John Alison, Maj "Tex" Hill, Capt "Ajax" Baumler and Lt Mack Mitchell

(Source: USAF Collection of National Air and Space Museum)

¹⁶⁵ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 174-5.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 175-6.

received a telegram from General Arnold instructing him to report to the Tenth Air Force in India.¹⁶⁷

China and the Flying Tigers

Arriving at Karachi, India, the last stopover before China, Alison reported in and expressed his desire to get to China as soon as possible. He was told that there was no available cockpit for him for the next day's departure. He would have to settle in until the next group was sent out.

The following morning, Alison received a telephone call telling him to report to the airfield. He had been the beneficiary of the former flight-lead's inability to handle his alcohol, but he did not care—he was off to Kunming, China.¹⁶⁸

Arriving in China about two weeks before the American Volunteer Group (AVG) was disbanded on 4 July 1942,



(Source: USAF Collection)

Figure 13. American Fighter Pilots in China (Alison sitting in the middle on the plane)

¹⁶⁷ Alison, interviewed by author, 12 December 2000 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 189-93. Alison was called on the carpet by the US Mission Chief for not following proper procedures but was nonetheless instructed to make the appropriate arrangements because the Shah wanted to go on the flight.

¹⁶⁸ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 198-201. The former flight lead was celebrating his anticipated departure to China with too much alcohol and got out of control. When some military police arrived, the pilot turned around and hit one of them. In the ensuing fight, the pilot was beaten so badly that he was unable to fly the next day.

Alison was assigned to the 16th Fighter Squadron of the 51st Fighter Group for a short time before being assigned as Major David 'Tex' Hill's deputy in the 23rd Fighter Group's 75th Fighter Squadron. When Hill returned to the U.S., Alison took over as the commander of the 75th and later became the deputy commander of the 23rd Group.¹⁶⁹

Alison shared a lot with the man for whom he worked and then ultimately replaced. Hill's men followed him not only because of his competence, but also because they knew he would be there right beside them during the tough situations. Alison was no different. Part of his leadership depended upon knowing the capabilities and limitations of his men. While in the 75th he had a standing rule that every new pilot had to first fly formation on his wing and then fight him in a mock dogfight. Concerning leadership, Alison stated, "When I became squadron commander, I made it a point that I would lead every difficult mission. . . . I tried to set an example in the airplane and I was very fortunate that I could do it."¹⁷⁰

Alison was always thinking of new ways to get into the fight. One night the 75th was being bombed. He noticed that he could see the exhaust flames from the engines of the offending Japanese bombers. Although the AVG airmen had never attempted to intercept Japanese bombers at night, Alison thought that he would like to try if the Japanese attacked again. The following night, having been alerted by Chennault's warning network, Alison and his operations officer, Ajax Baumler, took to their P-40s to set the ambush. Initially Alison had some difficulty finding the bombers, but finally he spotted six blue exhaust flames from three Japanese bombers and moved behind into a firing position. The bombers banked towards the American airfield and Alison followed them around the turn and began to close in. About ready to fire his first shots in anger, Alison set his sights on the left wingman. Realizing that he was going too fast, he maneuvered his P-40 in order not to run into the Japanese bomber. Just then, the top

¹⁶⁹ "14th Air Force 'Flying Tigers,' *Museum of Aviation Flight & Technology Center*, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 10 January 2001, available from www.museumofaviation.org/14th_AF.htm and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 217.

¹⁷⁰ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 265, 274-5.

turret gunner of another Japanese bomber stitched Alison's P-40 from nose to tail.¹⁷¹

By the time the aerial fight was over, Alison was able to claim two kills and one probable, but his worries were far from over. His P-40 was in terrible shape—all the oil had drained out of a five-inch hole in the crankcase—but the engine was still running. As he passed over the airfield, Alison realized that he was going too fast to land on the belly and gave it the gas in an attempt to make it to a near-by river. The P-40's engine by then had caught fire. Having cleared the last obstacle between him and the river—a railroad trestle—Alison braced himself for the impact of the collision. After the plane came to a halt, Alison stepped out on the wing and swam over to a long raft. A Chinese local helped him off the raft and up the bank where three Chinese soldiers greeted him with their rifles. Pulling out his American flag, Alison used his best Mandarin to say that he was an American. He had landed only a couple of miles from his living quarters, so the Chinese got a small boat and took him down the river to a dock right in front of his quarters. As Alison was walking up the dock to his home, six more Japanese bombers came over and blew up the dock. He was then sent to a local missionary doctor to treat his wounds—a burn on his forearm caused by a tracer bullet and a bad gash on his forehead caused by the gun-sight during the river landing.¹⁷²

Alison was aware of the sensitivities involved in coalition warfare and often became frustrated with the “kids” who denigrated the flying and fighting abilities of other cultures while totally ignoring their own faults. Once when he overheard a group of young American airmen say that the Chinese had no inherent flying abilities, Alison reminded them that in a sixteen-day period the 74th Fighter Squadron had ground-looped and wrecked seventeen airplanes right in front of the Chinese Air Force Headquarters. To drive the point home, Alison postulated that the Chief of the Chinese Air Force had probably been looking out his window watching “these airplanes going ass over teakettle” and saying to himself, “Gee, it’s a good thing Americans are rich because they have no inherent flying ability.”¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Chennault, 188-9 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 249-60.

¹⁷² Lt Col Ed Rector, interviewed by author, 5 March 2001; Chennault, 188-189; and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 249-60.

¹⁷³ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 311-2.

After serving a year in China, Alison was due to rotate back to the U.S. to assume command of a group. Waiting for his flight out of China, Alison was at Kunming when Chennault's warning network indicated that a Japanese raid was heading towards the airfield. Alison jumped to his plane and after having got airborne, was notified that the raiders were turning back. Not satisfied, Alison decided on a hunch to try and catch them on their way to a Burmese airfield. On the way, a relatively new pilot to the theater formed up on his wing, but because of some type of radio problem, the two were unable to communicate. In Alison's words,

I approached the Burmese airfield at 18,000 feet. I looked down and I saw two airplanes in the traffic pattern. ... So I went down in a rather big spiral as steep as I could hoping to catch those two airplanes before they got on the ground. ... I was at about 3,000 feet in a very steep dive. I pulled the trigger. ... All six guns just hit him almost at once and he just blew in every direction. I leveled off and went across the runway. I looked over and my wingman—I don't know how he stayed with me because I was coming down so steep and fast—but he shot at the other airplane.... I saw his tracers as he pulled out. They started short of the airplane and they walked through, and he missed it. When I pulled out...I was going in the wrong direction [from Kunming] and then the antiaircraft started firing at us.... So I kept the airplane right on the airfield. I went around it at the tree-level and did a 180° turn and started back. ... [The second pilot] came up alongside and he was very excited. ... He kept pointing back. I just assumed that, having missed the shot, he wanted to go back and get the airplane. I kept shaking my head. ... He kept frantically pointing back and I kept shaking my head and kept right on going. When we landed...I got out of the airplane and walked over. ... I said, 'I know that you are disappointed you missed the airplane, and I know that you wanted to go back and that's what you were signaling me about.' He said, 'Oh no, that's not what I was signaling about.' I said, 'Well, what were you trying to tell me?' He said, 'I wanted you to look at those five Zeros that were just above us.'¹⁷⁴

Upon his return to the U.S., Alison—now an ace with six confirmed kills—was given command of the 367th Fighter Group. He was supposed to have trained and then deployed to Europe prior to the Normandy invasion. While at a friend's house in Los Angeles, Alison received a call from his group saying that he needed to report to work immediately. When he got there, Alison found a cable from General Arnold instructing him to report to Washington, DC immediately. His staff had already made arrangements

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 337-42.

and Alison was in a plane within an hour.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Lt Col John N. Dick, 68 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 285, 293.

Chapter 5

OPERATION THURSDAY

Despite the [China-Burma-India (CBI) theater's] reputation as a 'back-water' theater, the geopolitical stakes involved were enormous. If Japanese forces in Burma could strangle China by isolating it from Allied support flowing through the CBI, thousands of Japanese troops stationed in China could be freed to fight the Allies in the Pacific. And if the remaining Japanese forces could then drive the British from India, the 'Jewel of the British Empire,' the military, economic, and political blow to the Allies would be incalculable.

Michael E. Haas
Apollo's Warriors

Nothing you've done, nothing you're ever going to do counts now—only the next few hours. Tonight you are going to find your souls.

Col Phil Cochran
Just before THURSDAY began

Introduction

In August of 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt, Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, and Chinese Foreign Minister Soong met in Canada for what later became known as the First Quebec Conference.¹⁷⁶ Although these Allied leaders and their planning staffs discussed many issues regarding the on-going war, perhaps the most significant in terms of this paper concerned the nature of the war in Asia.¹⁷⁷ During this conference, the Combined Staff planners developed what they thought were necessary steps for the defeat of Japan.

¹⁷⁶ This conference is also known as the Quadrant Conference.

Although somewhat broad, these steps formed the foundation for the recommended military strategy and included “the retention of China as an effective ally, the destruction of Japanese sea and air forces, the blockade of Japan, and the large scale bombing of the Japanese homeland as a preliminary to the possible invasion of Japan.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, not only did the planners recommend that US forces advance towards Japan on central, southwest, and possibly northwest Pacific avenues of approach, but also that British forces should establish a Burma-to-China supply route and advance through the Straits of Malacca and South China Sea.¹⁷⁹

Figure 14. Wingate and Cochran, 1944.

(Source: USAF Collection, courtesy of William Y’Blood)



The U.S. was desperate to keep China in the war for fear that if it fell, the large number of Japanese forces fighting there could be used elsewhere in the theater. Thus, the U.S. tried to keep China supplied by flying in supplies over the Himalayas from India. Because the U.S. wanted a safer and more efficient overland route to supply the Chinese, Roosevelt used the advantage gained from supplying Britain’s war needs to pressure Churchill into committing to a better effort to recapture Burma.¹⁸⁰

Gen Orde C. Wingate—a professional soldier who had earned a reputation in unconventional warfare during the Arab-Jewish conflicts of the mid 1930s—caught the eye of Churchill before the conference.

¹⁷⁷ One notable example is the establishment of the unified Allied command in the China-Burma-India theater of operations under the command of Lord Louis Mountbatten and his deputy, Gen Joseph Stilwell.

¹⁷⁸ Combined Staff Planers, memorandum, subject: Appreciation and Plan for the Defeat of Japan, enclosure to Combined Chiefs of Staff Document 313, 18 August 1943, in *Department of State, The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1970), 976.

¹⁷⁹ Combined Staff Planers, 976 and Wesley Frank Craven, and James Lea Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, vol. 4, *The Pacific: Guadalcanal to Saipan August 1942 to July 1944* (Chicago, IL: The Chicago University Press, 1950), 494.

¹⁸⁰ Philip D. Chinnery, *Any Time, Any Place* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 16 and Craven, and Cate, vii. See also Philip G. Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20

Churchill, liking the unconventional soldier's ideas for Burma, brought Wingate to Quebec to brief the Allies.¹⁸¹ In describing his ideas for Long-Range Penetration Groups (LRPG) to the Chiefs of Staff Committee at the conference, Wingate stated that the purposes of the LRPGs were "to disrupt the enemy's communications and rear installations. . . . [Furthermore], the consequence of their successful use [would be] widespread confusion and uncertainty behind the enemy's forward areas leading to progressive weakening and misdirection of his main forces."¹⁸² Moreover, Wingate identified the need for US air support. The requested resources included one bomber squadron per LRPG, between twelve and twenty C-47s, and a sufficient number of light planes to perform a variety of tasks, including evacuation of the wounded.¹⁸³

Because the U.S. favored opening up a land route to China through Burma, the US Chiefs of Staff were supportive of Wingate's plans. The chiefs' actions showed just how supportive they were. Having just recently denied Gen Joseph Stilwell—the ranking US officer in the theater—additional ground troops, the chiefs agreed to develop US special forces to be used in Asia.¹⁸⁴ Wingate's plan was not as eagerly accepted by other Allied members, especially by the British forces in theater, but because of high level support from Washington and London, the forces involved in Wingate's operations enjoyed "unusual freedom of action and access to available resources."¹⁸⁵

Selection of the Commanders

With presidential direction to fix the re-supply and evacuation problems, Arnold saw another opportunity to demonstrate airpower's potential. According to a memorandum that he sent to Gen George Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff, Arnold's plans for the air task force were

– 21 October 1975 and 11 November 1975, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-876, 177-178. Great Britain wanted to regain Singapore in hopes of preserving its colonial empire after the war.

¹⁸¹ "History of United States Army Air Force Operations in the India Burma Theater, 1 January 1944 to 2 September 1945," Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 825.01, 142-3 and Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951), 63-4.

¹⁸² Brig Gen Orde C. Wingate, memorandum, to Chiefs of Staff Committee, War Cabinet, subject: Forces of Long-Range Penetration—Future Development and Employment in Burma, 10 August 1943, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 145.81-170, 1.

¹⁸³ Wingate, memorandum, to Chiefs of Staff Committee, 3. See also, Craven and Cate, 495.

¹⁸⁴ Luigi Rossetto, "The First Air Commandos," *Aerospace Historian* 29, no. 1 (March 1982): 3. These forces were later assigned to Stilwell where they later became known as the famous "Merrill's Marauders."

¹⁸⁵ "History of United States Army Air Force Operations in the India Burma Theater," 145.

- a. to facilitate the forward movement of the Windgate [sic] columns
- b. to facilitate the supply and evacuation of the columns
- c. to provide a small air covering and striking force
- d. to acquire air experience under the conditions expected to be encountered¹⁸⁶

The only step left was to pick the right person to lead the organization. According to Arnold, “he must have a flair for novel ideas, enough imagination to want to use airpower in ways hitherto untried. He must be an innovator with the courage of his convictions. He must be tough.”¹⁸⁷

Cochran Meets with Arnold

When Cochran arrived in Washington he first met with Gen Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Arnold’s Chief of Staff. Vandenberg, who had come to know about Cochran while serving in North Africa, recommended him to Arnold for the position. Explaining that the job would require a lot of innovation, Vandenberg told Cochran that he was the right man for the job. Cochran, upset at the thought of missing the P-47 experience in Europe, set his mind to eliminating himself from consideration when he met with Arnold.¹⁸⁸

Despite Arnold’s rank, Cochran knew that it would be okay to speak his mind. He said,

General, I have been in Africa, as you know. I worked hard and I studied hard. I believe that right now I have more combat experience than any fighter pilot in your Air Force. I’m going to be brash enough to tell you that I think I know more about the practical side of fighter aviation than anybody in the Air Force. . . and here you are sending me over to. . .some doggone offshoot side-alley fight over in some jungle in Burma that doesn’t mean a damn thing. The big show is in England and I’ve got this job ready to go over there and I think I can contribute a hell of a lot more with what I know and have been studying for seven years.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ H. H. Arnold, commanding general, Army Air Forces, to [General Marshall] Chief of Staff, Washington DC, subject: Air Task Force Wingate, 13 September 1943, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 145.81-170, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Lowell Thomas, 29.

¹⁸⁸ Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 142-44.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 145-7.

Cochran sensed that Arnold was clearly irritated and explained that while he would carry out the task if so assigned, he felt it was his duty to say exactly how he felt. In a better mood, Arnold said that he understood and dismissed Cochran, saying that he would talk to him later. Before leaving Arnold's office though, Cochran pressed his luck one more time. He explained that he had run into his friend, John Alison, the day before and found out that Alison was being considered for the same position. Cochran went on to tell Arnold that Alison was the man for the job because of his theater experience from his days in China. Arnold, tired of Cochran, simply said, "You get out of here." So Cochran left.¹⁹⁰

Alison Meets With Arnold

When Alison went to meet General Arnold, he found Cochran waiting in the outer office. Both asked the other what he was doing there and both replied that they had no idea. After calling them in, Arnold said, "Alison, because I know you, I called you in. Cochran, General Vandenberg speaks so very highly of you that he suggested that I also have you in."¹⁹¹ He then described the troubles that Wingate's men had on the previous year's operations behind enemy lines in Burma.¹⁹²

After Arnold had explained that the purpose of the special air task force was to fly out Wingate's wounded with light planes, he told Cochran and Alison that one of them was going to have to take the job. This time, Alison objected. He explained that he had spent a lot of time training to be a fighter pilot and that he had been assigned as the commander of a fighter group that was getting ready to go to England. In fact he came right out and said, "I don't think you need me and I don't want to go." Cochran, trying to keep himself from having to go, chimed in, "General Arnold, I don't think he means that." To which Alison interrupted, "Yes, I do!"¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 147.

¹⁹¹ John R. Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 22 – 28 April 1979, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1121, 345.

¹⁹² On the previous year's campaign, Wingate was forced to abandon wounded who could not keep up. Especially troubling was the fact that he had to leave behind one of his best friends. Leaving men behind was troublesome for morale because of the pain of having to leave one's comrades in these conditions and the fear that it might happen to oneself. See Thomas, 24-6.

¹⁹³ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 346.

Arnold then sweetened the pot. He told Cochran and Alison that he was going to give the project the highest available priority and supply it with whatever resources were required. He essentially offered them *carte blanche* authority for men and material. After explaining what types of assets that Cochran and Alison would have at their disposal, Arnold told them that not only were they to evacuate the wounded, but they were also to “spearhead” the entire operation.¹⁹⁴ Based on this remark and Arnold’s non-verbal communication, Cochran and Alison knew what they were to do. Cochran took the message of “go over and steal the show” while Alison heard “transform the Wingate campaign into a new experiment in the use of air power.”¹⁹⁵

Convinced that this project offered an opportunity to do something new and exciting, Cochran and Alison asked if they both could go. Arnold said they could and, thinking that Alison was the more senior of the two, appointed him as the commander. When Alison corrected him on this matter, Arnold said, “Oh well, make it a co-command.”¹⁹⁶ Although Cochran and Alison were okay with this arrangement, the people with whom they interacted in the Pentagon found it confusing. This confusion, coupled with the secrecy surrounding the project introduced too many problems. Consequently, Cochran and Alison decided that since Cochran was the senior officer, he would be the commander.¹⁹⁷

Since their initial tasking to prepare a plan for this operation, Cochran and Alison had been very busy. They had taken Arnold’s direction to heart and had greatly expanded the original plan from one hundred L-5 light planes to a force that also included gliders, transports, fighters, and bombers. Not knowing how Arnold would react to their request, Cochran and Alison watched with anticipation as he reviewed their plan. After reading the package, Arnold looked over to Vandenberg and asked, “Van, does this thing

¹⁹⁴ “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, 1 and John R. Alison, interview with Interrogation Branch of Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Intelligence 25 April 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 142.052, 3.

¹⁹⁵ John R. Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001. See also, Thomas, 55.

¹⁹⁶ Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001, See also Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 347.

¹⁹⁷ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 348.

make sense?” With Vandenberg’s affirmation, Arnold initialed it, slammed it on the table and said, “All right, do it.”¹⁹⁸

Organizing and Equipping

Armed with the Arnold’s instruction to “do it,” Cochran and Alison set out to obtain both the men and material to build what had been named “Project 9.” They had simple criteria for the men whom they would select. They had to be aggressive, determined, and not afraid to accomplish something new or difficult. Efforts were made to get the most qualified men for the organization and took the form of officers and enlisted men drawing on their past relationships to recommend the finest men with whom they had been acquainted. Promising only “plenty of excitement and hard work,” word of this recruitment spread through informal channels and many a commanding officer throughout the U.S. dreaded the sight of any of Cochran’s recruiters because they feared losing many of their best men.¹⁹⁹

Although Cochran and Alison ran into some difficulty getting the equipment and the people that they wanted, armed with Arnold’s highest priority they were able to overcome the majority of obstacles. Most of the time it only took an authorization letter signed by the Army Air Forces Chief of Staff to get what they wanted. Arnold had instructed Lt Gen Barney Giles, Arnold’s chief of staff, as to what he wanted done. Cochran and Alison would simply type an authorization letter, run it through Giles to get it signed and then take it back to whatever organization that was giving them trouble.²⁰⁰

Filling roles not usually expected of combat leaders, Cochran and Alison found themselves in the acquisition and research and development arenas. One example involved the rockets for their P-51s. Although the design had been tested and approved, no operational parts had been produced. Getting access to the blueprints, Cochran and

¹⁹⁸ Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 161-3.

¹⁹⁹ John R Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, New York, NY, 24 April 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 815.452, 2 and “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 1.

²⁰⁰ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 348-9.

Alison had the brackets that connected the launcher to the airplane made in a Dayton, Ohio, machine shop. Likewise, after having each independently thought of using gliders for their operation, Cochran and Alison acquired a little-known device that could be installed in an a C-47 Dakota that would allow the snatching of a glider from the ground by tow aircraft.²⁰¹

If regulations were not altogether ignored, they were generally circumvented. Training was conducted at Greensboro, North Carolina, and the typical training for men going overseas was thrown aside so that a Project 9-specific program could be used. Glider tactics and methods were developed and practiced; training was given on the Allison engine and the P-51; and officers and enlisted men alike were trained on various types of weapons and ground support equipment.²⁰² Likewise, typical paperwork requirements were replaced. Once, during an equipment procurement conference, the topic of some 40 typewriters came up. Cochran, who had taken Arnold's injunction to heart, canceled them and stated, "we will count noses at the start of the campaign and check them at the end for the compilation of our records."²⁰³

Cochran and Alison placed great emphasis on building team loyalty and morale and the special equipment and treatment that they received played into their hands. Project 9 received the snatch-glider mechanisms, folding carbines, jungle training, special knives, jungle clothing, and Marine Corps boots.²⁰⁴ In addition, all men *flew* to India with the highest priority—even to the point of enlisted men bumping colonels off flights. "Morale was high," the unit history states, "too high in fact, as the words 'Blow it out—

²⁰¹ Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 158, 173-4.

²⁰² "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 2. In regards to building his unit, Cochran wrote, "It should be noted that the character of the mission assigned, the number and type of machines assigned to the force, as compared to the personnel to handle them, require a high degree of organization and a high degree of skill and leadership among the members of the unit. Ordinary selection methods would not have produced the personnel required for this task. Numbers have been held to a minimum to enhance mobility." See Colonel P.G. Cochran, memorandum, to Comanding [sic] General, Eastern Air Command, subject: First Air Commando Force, United States Army Air Forces, 22 January 1944, 3 in *Information Book—SEAC, No. 18*, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 805.011.

²⁰³ "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 2. Arnold had told Cochran and Alison, "To hell with the paper work, go out and fight." See Chinnery, 17.

²⁰⁴ Thomas, 105-6.

With Cochran in India, Alison finished acquiring men and material in the U.S. and the unit was ready to begin moving overseas. In late October 1943, portions of Project 9 began the trip to India. By 1 January 1944, all of the men and equipment of Cochran and Alison's task force—now renamed as the 5318th Provisional Air Unit—were in theater.²⁰⁸

Southeast Asia Training and Operations

Once in India, Cochran and Alison had many issues to tend to. These included assembly of equipment, bed-down of forces, training of personnel and coordination with the British. Thanks to many years of British rule, there were adequate facilities and Cochran and Alison established the light plane assembly shops in Karachi and glider assembly locations in Barrackpore. Moreover, the 5318th was given access to British airfields in the Imphal Valley located in the Assam hill country along the Burma-India border. Hailakandi would serve as home to the fighters and bombers and Lalaghat received the gliders and tow planes.²⁰⁹

Because both time and enlisted labor were short, the unit's officers rolled up their sleeves and helped assemble gliders and service both fighters and transports. As the unit history reads, "there were many days when [fighter and bomber pilots] had to assist in unloading gasoline and bombs from the railroad siding and help their crews gas and bomb the ships before a mission could be run."²¹⁰

and Museums Program, 1994), 15; Craven and Cate, 504 and History of United States Army Air Force Operations in the India Burma Theater, 149; and John R. Alison, interviewed by author, 14 March 2001. The B-25As and 450 Airborne Engineers were acquired in theater from Fourteenth Air Force. Originally, the British were supposed to have furnished the bombers for Cochran's unit. It should also be noted that different primary sources report different TG-5 glider totals—some report 75; others report 25. Alison stated that although he could not recall the exact number, the Air Commandos definitely did not have 75 TG-5 gliders and that the actual number was closer to 25.

²⁰⁸ "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 2-4.

²⁰⁹ Leon S. Dure, Jr., "Air Conquest of Burma," unit history, Eastern Air Command, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 820.04C, 14 and Thomas, 143.

²¹⁰ "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 2, 6.

The 5318th—now renamed the 1st Air Commando Group—was a tempting target in a resource-starved theater.²¹¹ Many people in the theater either were not cleared into, or failed to firmly grasp the reason for the unit. As such, not only there were there many attempts to use it for purposes other than for which it was intended, but there also were efforts to “steal” air commando resources and personnel. To ward off these attempts, Cochran carried two different letters. The first was written by Arnold and endorsed by General Marshall. It stipulated that Cochran’s organization was in a separate chain of command and was not to be used in any way other than to assist Wingate’s forces. The second, a copy of a “Dear Dickie” letter written from Arnold to Mountbatten, specifically explained that the air commandos were to be used in support of Wingate. Cochran wrote, “My producing [the letter] in a last ditch stand to hold autonomy helped keep the unit free to operate closely with the British Special Forces [sic].”²¹²

Wingate’s Plan in Jeopardy

Wingate’s original plan was a three-pronged push into Burma from three directions. One brigade was to have marched from India and crossed the Chindwin River from the west. The second was to have marched from the north in advance of General Stilwell’s American-trained Chinese. The third was to have been flown to China and then marched from the east. This third brigade was the key to the plan. It would have required the air transport of three thousand men with their mules and supplies over the Hump—an extremely difficult air route. Because air transport assets were scarce and because of the new priorities that came out of the Cairo Conference, Wingate was denied the necessary airlift. He thought his plan was finished.²¹³

²¹¹ The Air Commandos got their name as part of a tribute to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the SEAC Commander. He had been the chief of the British commandos in England. See Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 151.

²¹² John R. Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Group, memorandum, to General Arnold, commanding general, Army Air Forces, subject: History, Status and Immediate Requirements for First Air Commando Force, 21 January 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 145.81-170, 1 and Philip G. Cochran, Erie, PA, to Albert F. Simpson, Maxwell AFB, AL, 25 May 1956, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K110.7031-6, 1-2. The letter was referred to as “the Dear Dickie” letter because that was its salutation. Mountbatten’s close friends referred to him as Dickie.

²¹³ John R. Alison, memorandum, to General Giles, subject: Summary of Operations of First Air Commando Group, 10 April 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 145.81-170, 3. See also Alison,

One day while listening to Wingate's frustration about his operation being cancelled, Cochran suggested that the same effect could be accomplished by using gliders to transport the third brigade to the locations behind enemy lines instead of using them to move heavy equipment as originally planned. Wingate's LRPG plan was going to be canceled because of insufficient airlift unless someone could convince Mountbatten and his staff otherwise. Cochran, in an attempt to revive the plan, attended a meeting held by Mountbatten with his staff and asserted that the air commandos could airlift Wingate's men behind Japanese lines. Surprised, those assembled asked Cochran if he really believed that his unit could accomplish such a task. Cochran boastfully said, "Of course we can!"²¹⁴ When asked if they could fly in Wingate's forces within a two-week window, Cochran again boasted that they would do it in a week or less.²¹⁵

The plans for the aerial invasion took form. THURSDAY was the name given to the operation in which glider landings at each of two airfields—Broadway and Piccadilly—would form the initial spearhead to cut Japanese supply lines.²¹⁶ Landing 150 miles behind enemy lines, the initial gliders contained teams in jeeps that upon landing, would secure and mark the field with lights where the remaining gliders were to land. The follow-on gliders would contain equipment to scrape out a landing strip which would allow the remaining forces to be flown in by C-47 Dakotas. A few days into the operation, another airfield would be opened at Chowringhee—a location near the Shweli River.²¹⁷

interview with Interrogation Branch of Assistant Chief of Air Staff, 3 and Thomas, 114. The Roosevelt-Churchill decision of the Cairo Conference promised more supplies to China for Chiang Kai-shek and therefore decreased the amount of airlift available to Wingate's operations.

²¹⁴ Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, 2 and Thomas, 115.

²¹⁵ Alison, memorandum, to General Giles, subject: Summary of Operations of First Air Commando Group, 2.

²¹⁶ These landing strips were named after famous streets in the United States and Great Britain, respectively.

²¹⁷ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Wingate Report on Airborne Invasion of Burma*, Report 1833 (New Delhi, India: JICA/CBI, 15 April 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 3 and Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 254-5. Chowringhee, Calcutta's main street was named in recognition of the contributions made by the Indian troops.

Demonstrations of Capability

There was something about Cochran's infectious optimism that appealed to Mountbatten and Wingate, but not to many others outside of his group in the theater. In fact, Mountbatten and Wingate were the only ones in theater that showed any confidence whatsoever in the air commando's abilities. This confidence in American abilities played a role in the RAF's distrust and dislike for the air commandos—especially since the RAF did not believe that the Americans could deliver on the promises made by Cochran. On one occasion, in a daylight demonstration of the unit's capabilities, 1st Air Commando Group gliders inserted three hundred British soldiers with their mules and supplies and then successfully snatched out all of the gliders. Later, the air commandos inserted the same unit within a 30-minute window in a nighttime simulated airfield capture. During this demonstration, one-half of the gliders—loaded with simulated casualties—were snatched out at night. Towards the end of the demonstration, Wingate—having landed in an air commando glider that had been snatched out—told his aide, “Tell the RAF that I have not only seen it but that I have done it.”²¹⁸ Similarly, Mountbatten criticized the RAF for not measuring up to the Americans. After watching one of the Wingate-Cochran demonstrations,

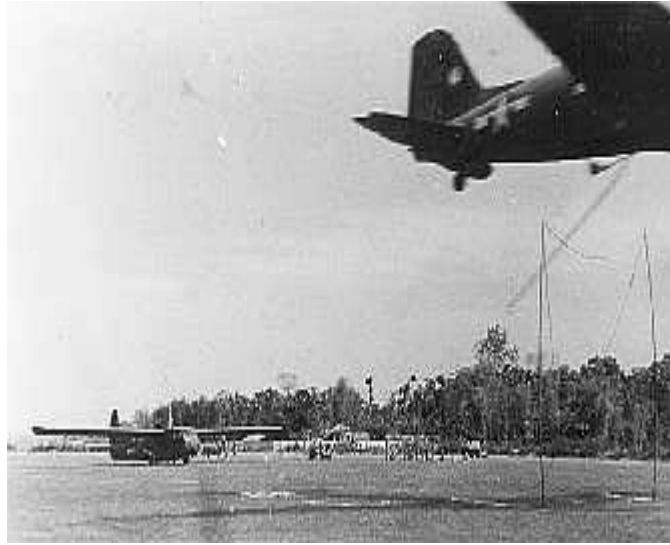
Admiral Mountbatten, at a staff meeting, strongly took to task the [RAF] for the attitude which they had taken and explained to them that he had seen maneuvers between a ground and an air unit which were successful and which had demonstrated to him that there were people in the theater who not only wanted to but who were going to fight the war.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Group, memorandum, to General Arnold, 1. See also Alison, memorandum, to Gen Giles, subject: Summary of Operations of First Air Commando Group, 1.

²¹⁹ Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Group, memorandum, to General Arnold, 2.

Figure 16. A C-47 Dakota About to “Snatch” a Glider from the Ground.

(Source: USAF Collection, courtesy of William Y’Blood)



These demonstrations were not without incident, though. Once, during a glider training flight at Lalaghat, there was an accident in which seven men died, including four of Wingate’s troops. Cochran was worried that the accident might have adverse affects of the willingness of Wingate’s men to fly in the gliders. This worry was put to rest when he received a note from the British commander of the unit from which the fatalities came. Expressing the consensus of the unit’s men, the note read, “Please be assured that we will go with your boys *any place, any time, anywhere* [emphasis added].”²²⁰

Innovations in Tactics and Equipment and Pre-THURSDAY Operations

On 3 February 1944, air commando fighters and bombers began an aerial campaign to soften up the Japanese for the coming invasion but in such a way so as to not only cut the Japanese supply and communications lines, but also to fool them into thinking that the attacks were in support of operations far from the intended invasion areas.²²¹

²²⁰ Thomas, 155. This was the origin of the Air Commando motto. It is also interesting to note that after a freak glider accident in which one of the Air Commando’s best glider pilots died, Cochran frequently rode in and flew gliders to show his confidence in his men and their equipment.

²²¹ “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 2-4. See also Thomas, 180-2. Cochran and Alison, while in Washington, had promised to begin operations on 1 February.

Figure 17. Air Commando Light Planes (L-5 Sentinel in the foreground and two L-1Vigilants in the background).

(Source: AFHRA)



During the ensuing period, the air commandos—under the direction of Cochran and Alison—showed extensive imagination in the development of new tactics and procedures. One example had to do with the rocket tube installation on the P-51A Mustangs. 1st Air Commando Group crews originally asked that the rocket tubes be installed on the outboard side of the bomb racks on the P-51s so that they could carry a more diverse weapons load. The armaments representative from Eglin Field, not wanting to do anything against regulations, declined and installed them according to the book. Not only was this configuration unacceptable because it took too much time to switch out the equipment, but also because the constant switching produced material failures which resulted in “hung” bombs and eternal gas tanks. Seeing first-hand the problems that the flyers were having, the Eglin Field representative moved the rocket tubes outboard of the bomb racks, which resulted in significant advantages.²²²

²²² Lt Col Grant Mahony, commanding Fighter Section, 1st Air Commando Group, memorandum, to Commanding General USAAF, subject: Report on Rocket [I]nstallation on P-51 [T]ype [A]ircraft, 27 April 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-SU-RE, 1. Having the rocket tubes mounted outboard of the bomb racks allowed the aircraft to carry six rockets at the same time as it carries two 325-pound depth charges (Mk 17 Mod 2), two 500-pound bombs, two 1000-pound bombs or two 75-gallon auxiliary fuel tanks. The Air Commandos were first Mustang unit to carry two, one thousand pound bombs in combat. See Lt D.G. McNeely and Lt F.N. Plake, “U.S. Navy Combat Air Information Observations of Operational Forces in India-Burma,” [Burma: United States Navy Reserves,] 8 May 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, 11; Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Supplemental Report on*

Another example was the tactic that the air commandos used to “cut” telephone lines. This technique—developed by Cochran in North Africa—used a fighter with a dangling weight at the end of a cable. As the plane flew over the wires, the weight whipped around and ripped the wires loose.²²³

Cochran and Alison found new uses for the light planes as well. The air commandos used these aircraft to mark targets that were out of sight of the ground troops. After an L-5 pilot had spotted a lucrative target, he would note the location and with a couple of fighters and bombers, return a few days later. As the L-5 flew over the target, the pilot would mark the position with a smoke bomb thrown out the aircraft. Having been marked, the target was easily engaged by the assault force.²²⁴ In another use of the light planes, ground crews fabricated bomb racks for the L-5s “not to drop bombs, but to drop ammo, food, water, and medical supplies” to the Allied forces on the ground.²²⁵

Because THURSDAY was to begin in early March (the exact date was dependent on the weather), the brigade that was to have marched to and crossed the Chindwin to take advantage of the action created by the two other brigades, set off by foot in early February. Although lesser known than other exploits, this pre-THURSDAY movement of forces and supplies with air commando gliders was nonetheless impressive. On the first mission, one CG-4A glider inserted a 16-man patrol on the east side of the Chindwin River. Although four people were injured during the landing, the patrol successfully carried out its mission and the pilot walked back to the base 15 days later. During a second mission, in order to assist the river crossing of the Wingate Brigade from the north, two CG-4A gliders landed on a sand bar on the east side of the Chindwin near Singkaling Ekanti to deliver nearly eight thousand pounds of river crossing equipment including folding boats, outboard motors, and fuel. Both gliders were successfully

First Air Commando, Report 1834 (New Delhi, India.: JICA/CBI, 15 April 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 6 and “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 5.

²²³ Thomas, 286. The two Navy observers described the tactic in detail. “A 150-foot length of ¾-inch line was secured to each end of the bomb racks. On this line is a metal ring approximately 3-inches in diameter to which is attached 150 to 200 feet of 5/16-inch steel cable. At the lower end of this steel cable are a series of weights (3 or 4) totaling 12 to 15 pounds. If the need arises, the bomb racks can be sprung, releasing the entire gear. The 3-inch steel ring permits the weights to hang as a plumb bob, slipping along the line during the maneuvering of the plane.” See McNeely and Plake, 5.

²²⁴ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1834, 5.

²²⁵ A.R. Van DeWeghe, “My C.O., Colonel Philip G. Cochran, USAAF,” 6 July 1993, 3.

snatched out the following morning.²²⁶

Although there were not many problems that were not worked out, with each having strong personalities, Cochran and General William Old—commander of Troop Carrier Command (TCC)—had trouble getting along.²²⁷ This difficulty was exacerbated by the near total independence of the air commandos from any other in-theater organization. Although this conflict of personalities made things difficult at times, it did not get in the way of effective

Figure 18. Alison, Cochran and Old Just Before THURSDAY Begins.

(Source: USAF Collection, courtesy of William Y'Blood)



²²⁶ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma*. Report 1448. (New Delhi, India.: JICA/CBI, 29 March 1944). Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 7-8 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Report of Troop Carrier Command Participation in "Thursday Operation,"* Report 1579, 25.

²²⁷ In describing the conditions at Lalaghat on 5 March 1944, Old noted that Cochran's men had no standards of dress and appearance. Moreover, he observed that the men were not in uniforms, were growing beards, failed to salute and that the officers and enlisted shared eating facilities and latrines. In response to the appearance complaint, Cochran issued the following directive.

To: All Personnel and Attached Organizations.

Look, Sports, the beards and attempts at beards are not appreciated by visitors.

Since we can't explain to all strangers that the fuzz is a gag or 'something I always wanted to do' affair, we must avoid their reporting that we are unshaven (regulations say you must shave) by appearing like Saturday night in Jersey whenever possible.

Work comes before shaving. You will never be criticized for being unkempt if you are so damn busy you can't take time to doll up. But be clean while you can.

Ain't it awful?

P.G. Cochran
Colonel, Air Corps,
Commanding.

See Brig Gen William D. Old, diary, Headquarters, Troop Carrier Command, Diary of the Commanding General, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 833.13-1., 110 and Thomas, 149.

cooperation when it was needed. For example, to reinforce the capabilities of the 1st Air Commando Group's 26 transport pilots and 13 C-47s, TCC contributed 13 Dakotas and 13 pilots to serve as co-pilots thereby yielding an even 26 airplanes for glider and transport operations.²²⁸

Cooperation between the air commandos and TCC also improved after the former were out under the operational control of Air Vice Marshall Baldwin, commander of the Third Tactical Air Force.

Although later directives made the air commandos responsible for the air movement of Wingate's forces and TCC responsible for supplying them, in reality both organizations had to collaborate to accomplish these tasks. Subsequent agreements between Cochran and Old made TCC operationally responsible for transports in combined operations while the air commandos retained control of the glider operations.²²⁹

THURSDAY Begins

On 5 March 1944, based on suitable weather predictions, Air Vice Marshal Baldwin ordered the commencement of Operation THURSDAY. Initially, operations were to have begun at 1740 hours with two pairs of gliders, separated by two and one-half minutes, with one pair going to Broadway and the other going to Piccadilly. After 20 minutes, glider operations were to have resumed again with alternating flights heading to the two landing areas. Because there were only 26 transports available for towing, the rest of the gliders would have to wait until the transports returned from their first trips.²³⁰

5-6 March—"A Better Place to Go To." Although Wingate had ordered no

**Figure 19: Discussions about Piccadilly
(Alison on left; Wingate on right).**

(Source: USAF Collection)



²²⁸ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Report of Troop Carrier Command Participation in "Thursday Operation,"* Report 1579 (New Delhi, India.: JICA/CBI, 1 April 1944). Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 2 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 358-59.

²²⁹ "History of United States Army Air Force Operations in the India Burma Theater," 150-52 and Craven and Cate, 504.

²³⁰ "Report By Air Commander, Third Tactical Air Forces On Operation 'THURSDAY,'" 17 March 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 815.452, 2 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Report of Troop Carrier Command Participation in "Thursday Operation,"* Report 1579, 3.

more flights over the proposed landing sites, Capt Charles Russhon, the air commando's photographer, pressed to take last minute photographs of Piccadilly and Broadway. After getting the boss alone, Russhon persuaded Cochran to allow the flight—but only if it was kept secret. Russhon had saved the day as everything at Broadway looked normal but Piccadilly was another story. Hundreds of logs had been dragged across the open areas by the Japanese and the center area appeared as if it could have been seeded with land mines. At 1700 hours, with the photographic evidence indicating a possible Japanese trap, all major players held a conference to determine the appropriate course of action. Cochran, Alison, and Wingate decided to send all the gliders into Broadway.²³¹

For Cochran, the decision to proceed after the Piccadilly discovery was not hard at all. He later stated, “[O]ur decision was easy, really. . . . [If] those British soldiers had that kind of guts, and that kind of heart that they were going forward and going in there, it was up to us to take them in.”²³² The Supreme Allied Command's Dispatch thought this situation highlighted Cochran's leadership. It stated,

Colonel Cochran showed what a superb leader he was in the face of this unexpected switch of the destination...at a time when it looked as though the plan might indeed have been compromised. Calling his pilots

Figure 20: Cochran (r) Explains to the Troops, "Boys, we've found a better place to go to!"

(Source: USAF Collection)



²³¹ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3; Craven and Cate, 505; Thomas, 198-200; and John R. Alison, interviewed by the author, 12 December 2000. The initial concern was that this might be a Japanese trap. The logic was thus. If the Japanese knew the invasion forces were going into Broadway and Piccadilly, they could force the entire lot into one airfield by setting up obstacles in the other. In doing so, the Japanese could set up an ambush and wipe out the landing parties. Wingate reasoned that the Japanese had blocked Piccadilly as a preventive matter without any foreknowledge of the impending invasion because Wingate had used the field during the previous year's campaign and this information was heralded in the 28 June 1943 edition of *Life* magazine. See "British Raid Burma," *Life* 14, no. 26 (28 June 1943): 19-24.

²³² Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 246.

together to change their briefing at this late hour, he began with great enthusiasm, 'Boys! We've found a better place to go to!'²³³

Both Cochran and Alison wanted to lead their men on this mission. After some time, Alison was able to convince Cochran that one of them needed to stay back at the headquarters with Wingate. Alison, who had never before flown a glider, practiced landing three times on the day before the invasion. The next night, Alison fell back on his primary rule of leadership and led the initial glider assault into Broadway.²³⁴

Trouble at Broadway. After deciding to put everything in Broadway, the first gliders were pulled aloft at approximately 1808 hours. Although the first few departures were uneventful, problems began to occur during subsequent departures. The gliders were not behaving as they should have been. After release from their transports, the gliders went straight down into a dive and it took tremendous efforts from the pilots to keep them from crashing. Despite the pilots' efforts, four gliders wrecked near the field due to broken towropes, three broke loose on the east side of the Chindwin River and two went down near the Irrawaddy River. It was apparent that the double tow was not working so Cochran made the decision to use single tows for the rest of the operation.²³⁵

Figure 21. Glider Wreckage at Broadway.



Because some of the gliders had been cut loose early and others' towlines had been broken, gliders landed in unplanned and sometimes dangerous areas such as at Japanese divisional and regimental headquarters. All of this had the effect of confusing the Japanese and therefore served as an effective, albeit

²³³ "Supreme Allied Commander's Dispatch, Part II," Southeast Asia Command, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 805.04A, 86.

²³⁴ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 408-9.

²³⁵ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3; Craven and Cate, 505; and Thomas, 211-28. The cause of this erratic behavior was over-packing by Wingate's troops. During the previous year's campaign, many of them had been caught short of supplies. Hoping to hedge against a repeat occurrence, many of the men stashed extra ammunition and supplies on the already overload gliders.

an unplanned deception.²³⁶

From the aerial photographs that Russhon had taken, Alison identified those positions at Broadway, which, if there was a Japanese ambush, would most likely be the hiding positions. The first two gliders landed near the positions identified by Alison and the British troops immediately exited and fanned out into the wooded area. Fortunately, there was no ambush. Although the field at Broadway looked good from the air, there were menaces hiding beneath the tall elephant grass. Teak loggers had used this field as a thoroughfare to drag their logs to the river. This practice had created ruts—some two to three feet wide and a foot and a half deep—which were perfect glider traps.²³⁷

As the next wave of gliders arrived at Broadway, it became apparent that something was terribly wrong. The ruts in the ground prevented the gliders from rolling forward and out of the way to either side. Alison knew something had to be done. With few other options, he directed the initial party to move the landing lights in an attempt to get the remaining gliders into another part of the field. Although the men moved the lights, it was to little avail—Pilots were unable to effectively steer their overloaded gliders. In spite of heroic efforts by the ground crews, many gliders crash-landed and most were impossible to move out of the way because the logging ruts had sheared off their landing gear.²³⁸

Soya Link and Pork Sausage. Because Broadway was quickly backing up with wrecked and overloaded gliders, Alison told the radio operator to send a message to Cochran in India telling him that they could not accept anymore gliders until they could clear and organize the field. In the state of confusion, the radio operator sent the *Soya-Link* message but it was not received back at the air commando headquarters directly. Instead, it was received by airborne C-47s and then relayed back to India. At 0227 hours, radio controllers at Lalaghat received the *Soya-Link* message and understood it to indicate some type of trouble at Broadway. Upon receiving this message, Cochran and Wingate

²³⁶ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Cover letter to *Wingate Report on Airborne Invasion of Burma*, Report 1833 (New Delhi, India: JICA/CBI, 15 April 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 5 and Thomas, 232-46.

²³⁷ Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, 3; John R. Alison, interviewed by author, 22 December 2000; and Alison, interview with Interrogation Branch of Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Intelligence, 6.

²³⁸ Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, 4 and Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 257.

recalled the airborne C-47s with their gliders in tow. Unfortunately, *Soya-Link* should not have been sent that night. It was the pre-arranged signal that the invasion force had met with disaster so it is not surprising that back at Lalaghat, Cochran and Wingate thought that Alison's group was under attack.²³⁹ When Cochran first received the signal indicating "catastrophe," he assumed the worst. His first reaction was to send in the rest of the force in an attempt to win the battle and to get all their people out. Talked out of this option by Wingate, Cochran was devastated.²⁴⁰

When the sun rose on Broadway, Alison could see that it was strewn with wrecked gliders. He asked the acting Airborne Engineer commander if he would be able to build an airfield at that place. When the young engineer stated that he could, Alison wanted to know how long it would take. "Well, if I have it done by this afternoon," the engineer replied, "will that be too late?"²⁴¹

At first light, Cochran sent an L-1 on a treetop flight to Broadway to find out what was going on. Upon arrival, the pilot called back to Hailakandi to say that not only had there had been no attack, but that the engineers were in the process of building the airstrip. Before noon, direct radio contact was reestablished with Broadway and *Pork Sausage*—the message indicating success—had been sent.²⁴²

Continuous reconnaissance on the morning of 6 March showed no Japanese reaction to the previous night's operation. P-51s, rigged with the wire cutting apparatus, broke important Japanese wire and telephone communications and both the Strategic and Tactical Air Forces further distracted the Japanese by bombing airfields, dropping dummy paratroopers and conducting other harassing missions. Out of 63 gliders sent for Broadway on 5 March, nine were recalled without incident, eight landed in friendly territory west of the Chindwin, nine landed in enemy territory east of the Chindwin and

²³⁹ Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 402; John R. Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 4. *Soya-Link* was the code word selected to indicate disaster because it was the name of a vile tasting imitation sausage made from soybeans in the British field rations while *Pork Sausage* was the code word selected to indicate success because it was the "real thing."

²⁴⁰ Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 262.

²⁴¹ Alison, interviewed by author, 19 February 2001 and Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, 4.

²⁴² Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 263 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5. The L-1 was a rugged airplane capable of slow landing on very short

37 reached Broadway, two of which crashed short of the clearing.²⁴³

6-7 March 1944—Open Chowringhee. On 6 March at 1620 hours, Alison sent word that 4700 feet of runway would be ready that night for C-47 operations and by 1730 hours aircraft started departing Lalaghat for Broadway. At 2111 hours, all of the Lalaghat aircraft had been cleared, immediately after which aircraft started departing Hailakandi. Alison had the field working so smoothly in fact, that on the that night, Broadway received a total of 62 C-47s while aircraft were landing to the north and taking off to the south.²⁴⁴

On the second night of THURSDAY, Wingate ordered the opening of a second base behind Japanese lines the following evening. Chowringhee—located 50 miles south of Broadway—was named after Calcutta’s main thoroughfare and although it was “perilously close to enemy air and ground forces,” Wingate wanted it opened earlier than had been planned because he believed that the Broadway was in danger of being attacked.²⁴⁵



(Source: USAF Collection, courtesy of William Y’Blood)

Figure 22: Bulldozer Being Loaded on a Waco Glider.

**7-8 March 1944—
Under the Light of a Burma
Full Moon.** On the night of 7-8 March, the glider insertion into Chowringhee went relatively smoothly. There were only two fatalities, but unfortunately they occurred when the glider carrying the field construction equipment crashed. Not only did the air commandos lose

fields. This aircraft had exceptional radios with which the people at Broadway could communicate with the headquarters at Hailakandi.

²⁴³ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1834, 7 and “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 8.

²⁴⁴ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5.

²⁴⁵ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5 and Thomas, 261.

two men, but also the equipment for building the field was destroyed. Upon hearing this news, Cochran sent a C-47 to Calcutta to pick up another bulldozer. At about the time that this bulldozer was supposed to depart Lalaghat, a bulldozer that had been at Broadway was arriving at Chowringhee. Alison, who no longer had a need for this equipment, arranged for a glider to deliver it to the new field.²⁴⁶

At midnight, C-47s began the journey to Chowringhee after having been notified at 2330 hours that the field was ready. At 0200, however, Lalaghat received word that only 2700 feet of runway was available. Because a fully loaded Dakota needed at least four thousand feet to safely land, Cochran tried to recall the aircraft. He was able to recall all but seven of the C-47s. These landed without difficulty at Chowringhee.²⁴⁷

At Broadway, Alison increased the inbound flights to 16 per hour—the maximum that he thought his controllers could effectively handle. Receiving a total of 92 C-47s, the efficiency at Broadway did not go unnoticed by senior leadership. In an operation report to General Stratemeyer, Baldwin remarked, “Nobody has seen a transport operation until he has stood at Broadway under the light of a Burma full moon and watched Dakotas coming in and taking off in the opposite direction on a single strip all night long at the rate of one landing and one takeoff every three minutes.”²⁴⁸

On 8 March, air commando P-51s—conducting sweeps in the Anisakan-Shewbo area—found 17 Japanese fighters on the ground. Dropping 500-pound bombs and strafing the field, the Mustangs destroyed all 17 enemy aircraft. On the way back to their base, they spotted nearly 60 enemy aircraft on the Swebo and Onbauk airfields. Having relayed this information back to the bombers at Hailakandi, the fighters strafed the field, destroying 36 enemy aircraft. At 2000 hours, air commando B-25s reached the enemy airfields and hit the aircraft revetment areas with fragmentary and incendiary bombs, destroying another twelve aircraft. The next morning, 18 P-51s, each loaded with two 1000-pound bombs went back and took out the remaining Japanese aircraft.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3-4 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5-6.

²⁴⁷ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3-4 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5-6.

²⁴⁸ Dure, Jr., 24 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 3-4 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 5-6.

²⁴⁹ “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 9-10. For this action Gen Stratemeyer later recognized the Air Commandos for destroying in one day 20 percent of the known Japanese air strength in Burma. See

8-12 March 1944—THURSDAY Wraps Up. By the fourth night of the operation, both fields were operating smoothly. Broadway accepted 85 C-47s that night; Chowringhee accepted 78. By the following night, the number of aircraft flown into Broadway increased to 95 but, the number to Chowringhee declined to 40 because that was all that was needed to complete the insertion of the equipment and personnel planned for that location. As such, Chowringhee was abandoned at 0800 hours on 10 March. At 1800 hours the abandoned field was attacked by the Japanese who then radioed back to their headquarters with news of a decisive victory over the Allies. Having intercepted this radio traffic, Air Command fighters and bombers attacked the newly acquired Japanese position.²⁵⁰

On the night of 10-11 March, THURSDAY was nearing an end. With 129 C-47 missions left to finish the insertion, Cochran and Alison tried to complete the work that night. They came up a little short. In the end, Broadway received 125 Dakotas that night and the remaining four were flown in the following night. Having successfully inserted the ground forces, the air commandos flew missions on and after 12 March to support Wingate's troops. Furthermore, Broadway continued to function as an operational airfield from which aircraft could launch and to which they could recover.²⁵¹

After Cochran was sure that the invasion had escaped the notice of the Japanese and that the Allied troops were in place, he sent a cable to Arnold that read, "The aerial invasion of Burma was strictly an air show."²⁵² And what an air show it had been. In 579 Dakota and 74 CG-4A Waco glider sorties, the air commandos inserted—150 miles behind enemy lines—9052 men, 1359 animals, 255 tons of supplies, one Bofors anti-aircraft battery and one 25-pound field gun battery without loss to a single C-47.²⁵³

Although Broadway had functioned well for eight days, it was not yet ready for 24 hour a day operations. As was the case, all operations were conducted at night with

Maj. S. Smith, Executive Officer, First Air Commando Force, memorandum, to all personnel of First Air Commando Force and [A]ttached Organizations, subject: Commendations, 11 March 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-SU-CO, 1 and Thomas, 288.

²⁵⁰ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 4; Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 6 and Thomas, 263-5.

²⁵¹ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 4 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1833, 7.

²⁵² Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 203.

²⁵³ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1579, 4. Six Dakotas were damaged during ground accidents.

all aircraft returning to their operating bases before sunrise so as to diminish the chances of being spotted by the Japanese. After eight days, the British moved in six Spitfires without Cochran or Alison's permission and kept them on the strip during daylight in plain view. These caught the attention of the Japanese who subsequently attacked Broadway and destroyed all six Spitfires.²⁵⁴

In mid-March, the air commandos began using their self-developed tactics to support the ground forces. Each British column had an experienced RAF pilot to serve as the ground controller of the air commando aircraft. Ground forces were in constant radio communication with the aircraft and used mortar smoke to mark targets. On one occasion at the White City stronghold near Mawlu, air commando P-51s responded to British requests for air support. Under pressure from the Japanese artillery in the surrounding rice patties, the British soldiers relayed good enough target information for the Mustangs to destroy the offending pieces in short order. In fact, the coordination between ground and air became so good, and the dive-bombing became so accurate that at times, air commando pilots were requested to attack targets only fifty yards away from friendly forces.²⁵⁵

Because of the Japanese offensive in the Assam area, it was decided on 22 March to reinforce Wingate's in-place forces by inserting the 14th and 3rd West African Brigades into Aberdeen in the Manhton area, and White City, which was located at Mawlu. In the case of Aberdeen—named after the hometown of Wingate's wife—the ground forces had built the initial glider landing strip so this was not an all air invasion. The primary purpose was to build up an airfield so as to fly in transports to re-supply the troops. Air commando gliders landed with field construction equipment and improved the strip to handle C-47s and Dakotas began arriving the next night. Unlike in Operation THURSDAY, TCC lost three transports in this operation. Two overshot on landing and crashed; one RAF aircraft was shot down.²⁵⁶ Just as in the operations described above, air

²⁵⁴ Thomas, 247-8.

²⁵⁵ "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 11 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 386.

²⁵⁶ "Supreme Allied Commander's Dispatch, Part II," 89-90; Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1834, 5; "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 11 and Thomas, 266-72. The fly-in took longer than what should have been expected because of an extreme shortage of air transportation assets. The opening of and movement to Aberdeen and White City coincided with a massive air effort to transport reinforcements and supply the 4 Corps efforts in the Assam area.

commando gliders also delivered anti-tank guns and ammunition for the Mawlu roadblock without incident.²⁵⁷

In addition to carrying troops and supplying already inserted ground forces, the transport pilots got into the force application game. They began carrying three-inch mortars, fragmentation clusters and incendiary bombs to throw out at targets that they encountered on their normal missions. One pilot's assessment was, "We may not have done any damage but I'll bet we scared the hell out of them."²⁵⁸

Tragically, on the night of 24-25 March 1944, Wingate died when the B-25 in which he was riding crashed into the side of a mountain.²⁵⁹ Once Wingate was killed, the energy and vision of the ground campaign was gone. The inserted troops had weakened the Japanese forces opposing Stilwell, but sensing vulnerability to his own lines of communication, Stilwell failed to exploit the weakened enemy.²⁶⁰

Alison Summoned to Europe and Washington. Just four days after Wingate's death, Cochran radioed Alison at Broadway telling him to report to Hailakandi because he had a message waiting for him. Alison decided to fly out in a C-47 with a damaged aileron that had been left by TCC. Although he had never flown a C-47 before, he wanted it out of Broadway and besides, he needed a way back. When Alison arrived at Hailakandi, he had *two* messages waiting for him. One was from General Arnold telling him to report without delay; the other was from Gen Dwight Eisenhower telling him to report without delay. After getting permission to return to Washington with a delay en route to visit Eisenhower, Alison was off to England.²⁶¹

Although air commando operations were initially supposed to have ended 1 May, the British still required their services. Because some of the behind-the-line airfields

²⁵⁷ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 1834, 5.

²⁵⁸ "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 12.

²⁵⁹ Craven and Cate, 507.

²⁶⁰ Van Wagner, 88 and Rossetto, 9-10.

²⁶¹ Old, 111, 125; Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 414-8; Alison, interviewed by author, 22 December 2000 and R. D. Van Wagner, "1st Air Commando Group: Any Place, Any Time, Anywhere," research paper, Air Command and Staff College, 1986, 89. TCC personnel had been waiting for a part to fix the aircraft and would not fly it out until it was repaired. Alison tried to convince them that the aircraft was perfectly safe given that it had no cargo and was only half full of fuel. Although the Old diary says that Alison had flown the C-47 on a previous occasion, Alison has assured me this is not true. Also, the diary claims that Alison was only able to lower the landing gear by experimentation. Alison says that he lowered the gear just fine but took extra time to talk to a C-47 pilot over the radio to ensure that he had performed all the necessary procedures.

were about to close, the British wanted another field opened near Pinbaw. The air commandos repeated again what they had accomplished at Broadway and Chowringhee. By this time however, the pace of operations and the living conditions began to take their toll on them and having been in the field for about three months, the unit's effectiveness started to fall. Many of the personnel contracted malaria and were removed from the unit. Most worked every day without even an afternoon off and were exhausted. Although the men were replaced, the back-fills were supplied from the theater manpower pool and generally brought no specialized skills or experiences. As a result, the output of work was not the same as had been possible by the specifically recruited, elite force that had originally arrived in theater. On 19 May, air commando fighters, bombers and transports conducted their last combat missions in support of the British ground forces. The light planes, having been transferred to the Northern Air Sector, continued to support General Stilwell's forces operating in the Mogaung Valley.²⁶²

The air commandos had performed better than anyone would have guessed. Writing after Operation THURSDAY, but during the on-going support, General Stratemeyer told Arnold that the operation had boosted the morale of ground and air forces and that although he was unable to predict what the long-term effects of these airborne operations would be, the results thus far, had exceeded all expectations. Moreover, naval observers of air commando operations wrote, "Col. Cochran and his men have fulfilled every requirement originally demanded of the air unit in the Wingate Plan and a great many more never believed possible."²⁶³

Maj Robert C. Page, one of the 1st Air Commando Group's medical officers noted the common characteristics of men in the unit. He described them as having "great enthusiasm" and an "overwhelming eagerness" to accomplish the mission.²⁶⁴ The light plane pilots—far from being the glamour boys of the Army Air Force—carried an exceptionally heavy load in the unit's successes. Averaging six missions per day (but

²⁶² "Unit History of the First Air Commando Force," 14 and Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj Scottie S. Thompson, 352. See also Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *Final Operations of First Air Commando Group in Burma*, Report 3137, (New Delhi, India: JICA/CBI, 30 May 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 2.

²⁶³ Maj Gen George E. Stratemeyer, [New Delhi, India,] to H. H. Arnold, Washington DC, 31 March 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 815.452 and McNeely and Plake, 31.

²⁶⁴ Maj Robert C. page, "Medical history of Project #9, 5318th Provisional Air Unit, 5318th Air Unit Special," Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, 12.

flying as many as 16), the pilots in this section were mostly enlisted men. They flew 7547 combat missions, evacuated more than 1800 wounded and delivered rations for 9700 men and 400 animals. Although this section experienced 40% aircraft losses, none were shot down by fighters or ground fire and only five pilots lost their lives.²⁶⁵

Described by Page as exhibiting “quiet, self-assured arrogance,” the P-51 fighter pilots flew 1482 sorties, logged nearly 4500 combat hours and dropped 1.16 million pounds of explosives. The B-25 crews flew 422 combat sorties, logged 1275 combat hours and dropped 431 thousand pounds of munitions. Together, fighters and bombers destroyed 90 enemy aircraft for the loss of six aircraft in which seven fighter pilots and two bomber crews lost their lives. UC-64 pilots were described as presenting “sallow, resentful indifference” while Dakota pilots showed “reassuring stability.” In 1635 combat hours, UC-64s moved more than 800 thousand pounds of freight and numerous passengers without loss of life. Remarkably, no air commando C-47s were lost or damaged with the exception of one aircraft, which struck a water buffalo. Thought to be “verbose and reckless,” glider crews perhaps faced the greatest danger as they experienced the highest personnel and material losses of the air commandos with 14 deaths and an overall aircraft attrition of 90%. Out of 99 gliders released over enemy territory, nine released prematurely and five crashed upon landing. Finally, the helicopter

²⁶⁵ “Unit History of the First Air Commando Force,” 15 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 3137, 6. Regarding the appreciation of Wingate’s men, Lowell Thomas wrote, “The attitude of the Wingate wounded was one of touching gratitude. They magnified in their own minds the job the light planes were doing in taking them out, so that they wouldn’t have to be abandoned to the jungle or the Japs. The British voiced their gratitude in glowing terms. The West Africans, Indians and Burmese, who couldn’t speak English, expressed their appreciation with glances and gesticulations. Wingate said the evacuation of the wounded meant everything for morale.” See Thomas, 278.

pilots were said to have “questionable enthusiasm.” This is understandable as these aircraft were not yet operational. In spite of this, between 21 and 24 April 1944, the air commandos conducted what is believed to be the first helicopter rescue behind enemy lines.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Page, 12 and Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, Report 3137, 5-7. The mission took so long because of the combination of enemy air patrols, overheating engines and poor weather.

Chapter 6

COMPARISON OF COCHRAN AND ALISON TO THE TEMPLATE

Each man is a hero and an oracle to somebody, and to that person whatever he says has an enhanced value.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

In this chapter, I compare Phil Cochran and John Alison to the leadership template that I developed in chapter two. Before doing so, however, I must briefly address two issues. First, one thing that should never be forgotten when comparing sets of human characteristics to an ideal is that no one—no matter how great a role he or she played in the course of history—is perfect. Rather, we each bring both negative and positive attributes to the situation in which we find ourselves. It was no different for Cochran and Alison. Had General Arnold waited until he found the perfect person for the job in Burma, the war would have ended, and still no one would have been selected. Instead, Arnold was under time constraints; he needed to get the force in place and ready for action. Thus, he picked the two men whom he thought were best qualified.

The second issue is that there are real differences between then and now and that is the topic of the next section.

Differences Between Then and Now

The times in which one lives can significantly affect the value of the attributes that one has. What may have been perfectly acceptable to do or say fifty years ago might be looked upon with horror today. Therefore, before looking at how well (or not)

Cochran and Alison fit into the leadership template that I developed in chapter two, it will be helpful to look briefly at some of the main differences between then and now.

Perhaps the greatest (and most obvious) difference is that then the world was at war and now our nation is at peace. Because thresholds of tolerance vary in relationship to the level of the interest at stake, our nation was willing to accept greater losses of American lives during WWII than it might be now if there was no perceived threat to our national survival.

During WWII, Cochran and Alison were focused on unconventional war, coalition support, guerilla warfare, and personnel recovery. In fact, the air evacuation of wounded personnel was the primary reason for developing the Air Commandos. Today, SOF focus primarily on counterterrorism and counter-proliferation while coalition support and personnel recovery remain as collateral missions.²⁶⁷

Besides these very broad differences, there are other more specific differences between then and now. During WWII, the air commandos used primarily conventional aircraft and equipment for their operation. There was little specialized equipment used. Today, most of AFSOC aircraft are heavily modified and only cosmetically resemble their conventional cousins. Because of this specialization, AFSOC aircraft are bought in small numbers and therefore are expensive. WWII was a war of attrition and damaged equipment could be replaced with relative ease.

Today, Air Force SOF leaders must know how to work within diverse groups—they must be sensitive to minority and gender concerns and integrate contractors within their plans.²⁶⁸ In WWII, cultural norms made concerns for minority and gender sensitivities less intense. Likewise, the armed forces of fifty years ago were considerably more independent from contractors than they are today. Along similar lines, because today's leaders are under greater scrutiny from the media than the leaders in WWII, they have greater incentives to maintain “the moral, ethical, and professional high ground.”²⁶⁹

Another significant difference is the relative maturity of special operations. In WWII, because special operations was in its infancy, no one was technically proficient in it so Cochran and Alison—two technically proficient fighter pilots—were able to lead the

²⁶⁷ Lt Gen Clay Bailey, commander, AFSOC, interviewed by author 9 March 2001.

²⁶⁸ Col Lee Hess, interviewed by author, 30 January 2001.

unit. Today, because special operations is relatively mature, it would be extremely difficult for someone without a special operations background to lead SOF.

Because the Air Commandos had General Arnold as a sponsor, Cochran and Alison did not have to worry about resources—typically, if they needed something, they got it. Today’s Air Force SOF leaders must compete with the other service components for resources and funding. Moreover, today’s Air Force SOF leader must handle the delicate balance between supporting other SOF and supporting the Air Component Commander. Cochran and Alison were never saddled with such a requirement.²⁷⁰

Finally, today’s Air Force SOF leaders lead within the construct of the “quiet professional.”²⁷¹ That is, SOF ideally would like to get in, get the job done, and leave without anyone knowing that they had been there. For Cochran and Alison to be successful, Arnold needed them to get in, get the job done, get out, and then spread the news of airpower’s success.

Individual Attributes

By drawing upon the experiences described in the previous three chapters, I will now explain to what extent Cochran and Alison had those attributes which make up the leadership template developed in chapter two.²⁷²

Vision

Cochran showed many times that he was a man with vision. In his experiences with both the 65th Pursuit Squadron in Connecticut and the Joker Squadron in North Africa, Cochran, knowing that he had to prepare those entrusted to him for war, envisioned and carried out the respective training programs required to hone his pilots’ flying skills. Likewise, Cochran’s actions at Thelepte gave evidence to his vision. When he first arrived at Thelepte, Cochran could tell that the unit there needed direction and focus. As the senior American airman, he stepped forward to fill the leadership void and improve the 58th Fighter Squadron’s war-fighting skills. Also, knowing that he had a little latitude to improvise because they were far removed from higher headquarters,

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Brig Gen Richard Comer, E-mail to author, 10 January 2001.

²⁷¹ Hess.

²⁷² Although most examples that I will provide come directly from the previous chapters, there are a few examples that are from previously unmentioned research. These examples were not included earlier

Cochran, after “reading” the situation, instituted “air guerilla warfare” tactics that proved to be quite successful.

Although General Arnold had provided the overall goal of having a US Army Air Forces unit “steal the show” during Operation THURSDAY, both Cochran and Alison demonstrated remarkable vision as they took General Arnold’s verbal direction and made it all happen. They designed the plan, recruited appropriate personnel, acquired necessary equipment, trained the forces, and finally executed tasks that had never been done before.

Good Communications Skills

I did not find many cases in which Alison stood out as an exceptional communicator but I did find many examples of Cochran’s ability to effectively convey information.²⁷³ In fact, contemporaries have described Alison as quiet and reflective and Cochran as brash and flamboyant.²⁷⁴ Although his speech was not eloquent, Cochran was quite effective at getting his point across as was evident when he convinced Lord Louis Mountbatten and his staff that the Air Commandos could provide the appropriate air support and thereby save Wingate’s plan.

Likewise, Cochran’s order in response to General Old’s criticism of his unit’s grooming standards—while not typical of formal Army correspondence—nonetheless was quite effective in striking a balance between adhering to Army regulations and avoiding unnecessary criticism of General Old. In regards to this Alison stated, “If Phil had put out a hard order and said it was General Old’s fault, everybody would have [shaved], but they would have been talking about General Old, and in the language of the GI, they would have said, ‘We have a chicken shit commander.’ We didn’t want that.”²⁷⁵

Another example of Cochran’s ability to succinctly communicate with his men occurred on the first night of THURSDAY. In the confusion that surrounded the airfield

because they did not fit into the logical flow of the thesis yet they provided insight to the attribute being discussed.

²⁷³ The possible exception being in 1944 when Alison was selected to address the annual luncheon of the Associated Press in New York to describe the just recently completed aerial invasion. Not much information about this speech is available, though, except the transcript. See John R. Alison, deputy commander, 1st Air Commando Force, transcript of address to annual luncheon of the Associated Press, New York, NY, 24 April 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 815.452.

²⁷⁴ Col Davis “Tex” Hill, interviewed by author 3 January 2001, Lt Col William W. Johnson, interviewed by author, and Lt Col Ed Rector, interviewed by author, 5 March 2001.

after it was discovered that one of the primary landing areas had been blocked with hundreds of logs, Cochran—after the decision had been made to proceed to Broadway—summed it all up in a single sentence when he optimistically announced, “Boys, we’ve found a better place to go to.”

An Ability and Desire to Teach

Both Cochran and Alison clearly demonstrated an ability and a desire to pass on the information they knew to others. For Cochran, this theme is evident in his efforts with underclassmen while at flight training, his preventing Art Salsbury from being “washed out” of the Air Corps, and his successes with the 65th Pursuit, Joker, and 58th Fighter squadrons. Even in the midst of the invasion of Burma, Cochran took time to teach those around him. Two US Navy observers noted in their report, “Col. Cochran’s extreme patience and willingness to explain the intricate details of the operation contributed more than anything else to whatever merit the report possesses.”²⁷⁶ The “official” Army Air Forces recognition of his teaching ability came first from General Cannon when he asked Cochran to work in Northwest African Training Command to prepare newly arrived fighter groups for combat operations and then from the Air Staff when Cochran was directed to prepare First Air Force fighter units before they left the U.S. for overseas assignments.²⁷⁷

Alison demonstrated his ability to teach during his assignments working for the Lend-Lease assistance to Great Britain and the Soviet Union. He was sent to Great Britain as the operational expert on the P-40 and although his duties with the RAF were shortened by the latter’s victory in the Battle of Britain, Alison nonetheless worked with countless RAF pilots during his time in England. Likewise, Alison’s ability to teach had a significant impact on Russian aviation. Not only did Alison “check out” Soviet pilots in P-40s during his time in Russia proper, but he also taught many others how to fly A-20s and B-25s while he worked the shipment of aircraft from Persia.

²⁷⁵ John R. Alison, transcript of oral history interview by Maj. Scottie S. Thompson, 22 – 28 April 1979, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-1121, 359-60.

²⁷⁶ Lt. D.G. McNeely and Lt. F.N. Plake, “U.S. Navy Combat Air Information Observations of Operational Forces in India-Burma,” [Burma: United States Navy Reserves,] 8 May 1944, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file GP-A-CMDO-1-HI, 31.

²⁷⁷ It was during his assignment at Northwest Africa Training Command that Cochran worked with the 99th Pursuit Squadron—a unit better known as the Tuskegee Airmen.

Introspection

Both Cochran and Alison showed an ability to step back, to analyze what was and was not working, and to make adjustments as necessary. Cochran displayed this attribute after making the mistake of being the first one off the *Archer* in North Africa; when he made the switch to an “air guerilla” style of warfare at Thelepte; when he realized that double glider tows were not working in Burma; and when he decided not to attempt to rescue the forces whom he thought were under attack at Broadway.

Alison also revealed this facet of his personality. Most notable, perhaps, was the time in Persia when he lost his temper with the Soviet inspectors. Realizing that he could accomplish nothing with his anger, Alison—who somewhat empathized with the Soviets—apologized and came to agreement on the manner in which the transfer would be conducted.

Integrity

A reader with no military experience may point to this particular attribute and say that Cochran and Alison had trouble living up to the ideal. After all, in North Africa Cochran ignored the verbal instruction to stay in place and await further instructions; in Burma he allowed a last-minute photographic flight in spite of Wingate’s prohibition against it; and he failed to reveal his hypoglycemia to Air Corps officials. Likewise, Alison violated regulations by practicing acrobatics at night out of view from his superiors.

As was described earlier, all of these things occurred in a time and an organization that was vastly different than today and most of these were done for good reason. If one’s actions are to be judged by the results, then most of the actions described above—with one possible exception—do not really call into question the integrity of either Cochran or Alison. By hiding his hypoglycemia from the Air Corps, Cochran not only potentially exposed himself to great danger, but also to those with whom he flew.

Despite these instances, others show the integrity of both these men. While in the Soviet Union and China, Alison brushed aside his preference of not drinking hard liquor in efforts to “save face” for the U.S. with its Chinese and Soviet allies. It would have been easy for him to do otherwise. Additionally, Alison—after a long winter in the Soviet Union—could have sat around in Persia waiting for Lieutenant Colonel Griffiss’ cable. Instead, he sought out work to contribute to America’s war efforts.

Although I did not address this particular example in the previous chapter because it did not pertain to Cochran and Alison's influencing factors or Operation THURSDAY, I think it is appropriate as it speaks directly to both men's integrity. After the war Alison, Cochran and some other veterans had plans to start a freight-hauling airline. Because of their war experience, the War Assets Administration had allocated the group seven C-54s at a surplus price of \$90,000 apiece for the specific intent of starting the airline. When the financial backing for the project fell through, commercial airlines offered to lease these airplanes from Alison and Cochran's group. Although they would have been within their legal rights to accept the deal, the members of the group did not want to create the appearance of impropriety. In honoring the friendships with their associates in the War Assets Administration, Alison, Cochran, and the others turned down millions of dollars.²⁷⁸

Leadership by Example and "From the Front"

I found clear evidence in my research that both Cochran and Alison led by example and from the front—both unwilling to ask from their subordinates what they would not do themselves. At Thelepte, Cochran led numerous attack missions and would have done the same in Burma had he not been grounded by Mountbatten.²⁷⁹ Moreover, after a freak glider accident in which the pilot was killed, he rode in and flew gliders to show his confidence in his men and equipment.

While in China, Alison not only had the standing rule that before any of his men would go into combat, they would first have to fly on his wing and then fight him in mock dog-fights, but also that he would lead all the dangerous missions. After he had thought of trying to intercept the Japanese bombers at night, Alison (with Major Baumler) was the one trying to do what no one else in the squadron had done before.

In India while preparing the equipment for invasion, the officers—following Cochran and Alison's example—helped the enlisted men assemble and then service the

²⁷⁸ Having sold for \$90,000 in 1947, by 1950 the value of the C-54s had skyrocketed to \$750,000 each. See Alison, 474-7.

²⁷⁹ A close call in which Cochran had been reported killed caused Mountbatten to reconsider allowing Cochran to fly in enemy territory. Mountbatten was not only worried about Cochran's life, but also the viability of the plan. If Cochran fell into Japanese hands, the mission would have to be called off because of his extensive knowledge of the plan. See Philip G. Cochran, transcript of oral history interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 20 – 21 October 1975 and 11 November 1975, Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file K239.0512-876, 297-302.

aircraft and gliders. Furthermore, both Cochran and Alison wanted to lead the invasion of Burma but Alison prevailed. Having convinced Cochran that one of them needed to stay back to direct the operations, Alison piloted a glider in the first wave at Broadway despite only learning to fly the aircraft the day prior.

Technical Proficiency and Confidence

Cochran was a very good pilot and recognized as such by senior leaders in the Army Air Corps. When it came time to pick someone who would be good enough lead a bunch of “green” pilots off an aircraft carrier, General Cannon knew exactly whom to pick. Cochran’s flying skills were matched by his optimism. It was his confidence that was at least partially responsible for convincing Mountbatten and his staff that the Air Commandos could indeed provide the necessary support to Wingate’s forces.

If Cochran was a good pilot, Alison was a great one.²⁸⁰ Building upon his great academic start at flight training, Alison continually sought to improve his flying skills. Recognized as a “great stick” Alison was selected for and impressed the observers during the P-40 demonstration for the Chinese. Also standing as a testament to his flying skills was his ability to easily transition to other aircraft in which he had received little to no training. These included the A-20, B-25, C-47, and CG-4A glider.

Care for One’s Subordinates

Both Cochran and Alison cared greatly about the men who served under them. Perhaps one of the greatest ways that a leader cares for his troops is by ensuring that they are properly trained, clothed, equipped, and recognized. Both ensured their forces were trained and equipped for the missions that were expected of them.²⁸¹ For operations in Burma, they acquired specialized aircraft, equipment, clothing, and weapons—all of

²⁸⁰ Col David “Tex” Hill and Lt Col Ed Rector speak very highly of Alison’s flying abilities. Col Rector goes as far to say that Alison is tied with two other men as being the best pilot he has ever seen. See Col David Hill, interviewed by author, 3 June 2001 and Lt Col Ed Rector, interviewed by author, 5 March 2001.

²⁸¹ During their first winter in China, Alison’s men did not have adequate cold-weather clothing. Alison had thirteen sweaters and most of the pilots had flying jackets but his enlisted men had no such “luxuries.” To remedy the situation, Alison made the sweaters and jackets “communal property”—hanging them in the orderly room where they could be retrieved by those most needing them. Alison recalled, “When the mechanics got up before daylight to go down and warm up the airplanes, they had the privilege of wearing the sweaters and jackets. The pilots would get down to the flight line shortly after daylight. When the sun came up, it would get a little warmer, and then [the mechanics] would give the flight jackets back.” See Alison, 218.

which helped to raise their men's morale.²⁸² Furthermore, Cochran went to great efforts to give credit to his men—attributing his successes to “the kids, these American kids that are just automatically wonderful.”²⁸³

If Cochran and Alison had any deficiency in caring for their people, it had to do with enforcing discipline. Cochran was notoriously lax at enforcing standards of grooming and appearance and Alison was no strict disciplinarian, either. Perhaps the most obvious time that Alison should have enforced discipline but did not involved Maj Albert “Ajax” Baumler. Baumler was an alcoholic and never should have been flying in the first place but he was a friend and an exceptional pilot—when he was sober. One morning, Baumler—who had been drinking heavily—took off, circled the field, landed, and taxied right into a line of aircraft, severely damaging two. Alison tried to help Baumler without resorting to discipline but to no avail. Eventually, Baumler was sent back to the U.S. by General Chennault.²⁸⁴

Flexibility

Although there was not a great deal of evidence demonstrating the attribute of flexibility, there was some. In North Africa, Cochran showed his ability to transition from a guerilla to a more traditional style of war when the 33^d Pursuit Group headquarters arrived at Thelepte. Similarly, both Cochran and Alison were flexible enough to operate effectively in the acquisition and research and development arenas while they were organizing and equipping the Project 9.

Full Confidence In and Trust of Subordinates

Both Cochran and Alison displayed confidence in and trust of their subordinates. Perhaps the most obvious example was Cochran's decision to violate Wingate's prohibition against overflights of Broadway and Piccadilly. Relying on the advice and recommendation of the unit photographer, Cochran made his decision that certainly prevented numerous deaths and injuries.

²⁸² One intelligence report remarked, “About morale . . . there can be no doubt. ‘If Phil (or John) says do it, then by God we do it,’ is a common expression that ends all question.” See Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma*, Report 1448, (New Delhi, India.: JICA/CBI, 29 March 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 5.

²⁸³ Lowell Thomas, *Back to Mandalay* (New York: Greystone Press, 1951), 319.

²⁸⁴ Alison, 277-84.

Eclectic Humanitarianism

Though probably not thought of largely during WWII, Alison—perhaps without knowing it as such—did exhibit this characteristic. Looking beyond many of the stereotypes of the day, Alison reached out and improved international relations—even if by a small amount—with the flights that he gave to Persian Air Force officers, enlisted men, and the Minister of War.

Cultural Relativity

Again, Alison demonstrated this attribute probably without considering anything other than just being a good person. Although he lost his temper with the Soviet inspectors in Persia, Alison was able to place himself in their shoes and understand the position that the inspectors were in—he was able to understand their culture. Likewise, while in China and having overheard young American airmen belittle Chinese flying abilities without recognizing their own faults, Alison was quick to point out Americans endured their share of flying accidents and that no culture is necessarily better than another.

Ability to Assess and Willingness to Take Risks

The acceptance of risk was dramatically different in WWII than it is today. Even so, I did notice one occasion in my research where the discussion of risk appeared. This occurred during the discussions after the discovery of logs on Piccadilly. Concerned that an ambush was waiting at Broadway, both Cochran and Alison considered and accepted the risks and determined that the operation should continue to the one landing site.

Credibility with SOF Counterparts

Because US SOF were still in their infancies at this time, Cochran and Alison did not have to concern themselves with credibility with other US SOF components. They did, however, need credibility with the British and indigenous SOF. Cochran and Alison did develop this credibility with demonstrations of glider infiltration and exfiltration capabilities and through the evacuation of nearly 700 wounded soldiers from the Arkan campaign before the start of THURSDAY.

Ingenuity

Although Cochran and Alison's ingenuity seemed to blossom while with the Air Commandos, each displayed this attribute before Burma. Examples of Cochran's ingenuity include using the "spotter chick" in the New England "air war" and his prediction of and responses to the German over-flights at Thelepte. Alison was a creative

thinker also. His examples include the assembly and checkout of P-40s sent to Russia with no technical orders and little help and his idea for and execution of the nighttime intercept of Japanese bombers in China.

Although Cochran and Alison may not be directly responsible for innovations developed for Operation THURSDAY, they are indirectly responsible because they were responsible for bringing together the right people with the right ideas. Examples of ingenuity during the Burma operations include a Project 9 specific training program, the non-conventional rocket tube installation on the P-51, the telephone line cutting tactics, using light planes for marking targets, dropping depth charges against land targets, and using a combination of oil-filled drop tanks and tracer bullets as an effective weapon.

Balanced Advocacy for Special Operations

Because the idea was to use airpower in new, unconventional ways, the idea of balanced advocacy does not apply in this situation.

Conclusion

Both Cochran and Alison matched up well to my Air Force special operations leadership template but not as well as the two of them combined. When considered together, Cochran and Alison exhibited fifteen attributes of the sixteen listed in my template. Although not conclusive proof, this thesis does lend evidence to Mr. Clay McCutchen's assertion that the Air Commandos could not have accomplished what they did had it not been for the contributions of both Cochran and Alison.²⁸⁵

Amazingly, these two friends with diametrically opposed personalities—one who “preferred hat-check chicks” and the other described reverently as “Father John”—meshed like the gears of a fine timepiece. This rare consonance between a commander and his deputy did not go unnoticed. One report stated, “The existence of a commander and deputy . . . in such perfect accord that the decision of the one is automatically the

²⁸⁵ Clay McCutchen, Air Force Special Operations Command History Office, interviewed by author, 5 January 2001.

decision of the other is not the least remarkable aspect of the air force.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ Joint Intelligence Collection Agency, *First Air Commando Force Invasion of Burma*, Report 1448, (New Delhi, India.: JICA/CBI, 29 March 1944), Maxwell AFB, AL: AFHRA file 810.6091A, 5.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The nation that will insist upon drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking by cowards.

Sir William F. Butler
Charles George Gordon

Introduction

By both developing an Air Force special operations leadership model and examining Phil Cochran and John Alison's careers—including their organizing, training, and employing the 1st Air Commando group—I have shown that we can take lessons from the past. That is, although slightly different because of the context of the 1930s and 1940s, the leadership attributes exhibited by Cochran and Alison are applicable to today and can assist, but should not be the sole determinant in identifying and selecting 21st Century Air Force special operations leaders.

Conclusions

Relevance and Importance

Special operations have taken on increased significance since the end of the Cold War. Spanning the spectrum of military action from peace through full-scale war, special operations provides the leadership with a wide range of options which take advantage of clandestine, covert, or low-visibility techniques to produce both strategic and operational

results.²⁸⁷

As the air arm to US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), AFSOC provides critical support to the joint force so that it can fulfill its requirements across the spectrum of military engagement. The quality of special operations leadership—from small teams up to and including the MAJCOM commander—has a great influence on the degree to which AFSOC is able to support USSOCOM in its mission. As then Secretary of the Air Force Sheila E. Widnall and Chief of Staff Gen Ronald R. Fogelman wrote in the foreword of Dennis M. Drew's, "Leading Airmen Into the Twenty-First Century,"

Leadership was the indispensable element in the development of air and space power over the past 80 years. Strong leadership maintained the vision of airpower in the face of great skepticism and outright hostility. Strong leadership provided the planning so crucial to successful air campaigns. Such leadership took airmen into harm's way and proved the vision of air power pioneers was correct. It was leadership in the cockpit, on the ramp, in the shops, throughout the base, at the headquarters, and in the Air Staff that brought victory and brought the early promise of air power to fruition. Leaders from junior NCOs to four-star generals made the Air Force the world's most respected and most effective military organization.²⁸⁸

Although these comments are directed towards Air Force leadership in general, the ideas easily translate to the importance of leadership within AFSOC. Thus, the identification and selection of capable Air Force special operations leaders are critical.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Template

To help identify those people that might make effective Air Force special operations leaders, I started with those attributes required of any leader—whether in charge of a Cub Scout pack or an international corporation. Next, I adjusted the list based on the unique requirements of military leadership. Finally, I tuned the list to take into account the differences between general military and special operations leadership. To do this I interviewed, corresponded with, and read the transcripts from oral history interviews with Air Force special operations leaders—both officers and enlisted men

²⁸⁷ Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., "Sources of Instability: Implications for Special Operations Forces," in *Special Operations Forces: Roles and Missions in the Aftermath of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Schultz, Jr., Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., and W. Bradley Stock (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 17; *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, Version 2.1 (Fayetteville, NC: Cubic Applications, Inc., 1998). CD-ROM, January 1998; and Briefing, Air Force Special Operations Command, subject: AFSOC Command Brief, February 2001.

²⁸⁸ Dennis M. Drew, "Leading Airmen Into the Twenty-First Century," (Draft), vi.

alike—to determine those attributes which are unique to special operations.

Obviously, the strength of the model lay with the sources of information—the people. All who provided inputs—ranging from chief master sergeants to three-star generals—have spent the majority, if not all of their careers in Air Force special operations. These truly are the people who have “been there, done that.”

My leadership template suffers from the same weaknesses as all models do. It does not fully represent reality—it is only an approximation with a value in proportion to the integrity put into its development.²⁸⁹ As Dr. David R. Mets has written,

[The model’s] utility is that it yields a conceptual framework and perhaps a commonly understood vocabulary that enables us to analyze and discuss a problem. It is an academic device to facilitate explanation and learning. But it cannot be used as a definitive guide to action. It can help you think about leadership, but it will certainly not make you a good leader.²⁹⁰

Two Were Better Than One

As career fighter pilots, Cochran and Alison were not obvious choices to lead the air commandos in Burma but General Arnold saw their potential. As I compared them to the template that I developed in chapter two, neither Cochran nor Alison exhibited all the attributes. Considered as a team, however, Cochran and Alison did quite well.²⁹¹ The leadership attributes exhibited by WWII unconventional warfare commanders that would assist us in selecting today's special operations leaders, therefore, are:

17. Vision.
18. Good communications skills.
19. An ability/desire to teach.
20. Introspection.
21. Integrity.
22. Leadership by example and “from the front.”
23. Technical proficiency and confidence.
24. Care for one’s subordinates.

²⁸⁹ David R. Mets, “In Search of a 21st Century Air leadership Model: Fodder for Your Professional Reading,” 2.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Cochran and Alison exhibited 14 of the 14 attributes that were applicable to their times. The other attribute was *balanced advocacy for special operations* and because the idea was to use airpower in new, unconventional ways, this attribute did not apply to their

25. Flexibility.
26. Full confidence in and trust of subordinates.
27. Eclectic humanitarianism.
28. Cultural relativity.
29. Ability to assess and willingness to take risks.
30. Credibility with SOF counterparts.
31. Ingenuity.

Although not demonstrated by Cochran or Alison, *balanced advocacy for special operations* is included in the Air Force special operations leadership template that I developed in chapter two.

Implications

Given my template's inherent weaknesses, it should not be used as a checklist by which Air Force special operations leaders are selected. Rather, it should be used as just one of many other factors considered when leaders are chosen. Perhaps a better use for the template and the research that supports it would be its inclusion in the professional development curriculum for junior members of the AFSOC community. In that way, the future of AFSOC could have an opportunity to learn a bit more about the leadership demonstrated during the birth of their proud heritage.

A Final Thought

The results of my thesis are not earth shattering nor will they fundamentally alter the way Air Force special operations units select leaders. Instead, the results are the product of an intellectually honest attempt to examine the connection between one small part of air power's past and an increasingly important part of its future. As I sat in the dining room of the Army-Navy Club in Washington DC listening to John Alison tell of his youthful experiences in Russia, China, and the jungles of Burma, I saw in his eyes the

situation.

brightness of a man who with a friend from Erie, Pennsylvania nearly 60 years ago, had indeed seized the day and made his life extraordinary. *Carpe diem!*

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